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Traditional Marriage System of the Ao-Nagas

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Abstract

The Nagas have very less written records and that is why the Naga history is so much depended on oral traditions of its customs and habits that were passed down by word of mouth through generations. The American Missionaries who were archaeologist, ethnographers and sociologist left an excellent tribal monograph from which we could get important information and study them along with other works done by Naga scholars and bring about an assessment of the traditional ancient marriage system of the Ao-Nagas. Nagaland is a land inhabited by different tribes. These different tribes have their own culture and traditions. Of the different tribes, the Ao-Nagas are a major Naga ethnic group native of Mokokchung district inhabiting the North Eastern part of North East India. The Ao-Nagas were endowed with rich variety of cultural and traditional practices. The AOs belief in recounting their history through oral tradition. It is generally accepted that Chungliyiimti is the birth place of the Ao-Nagas. It is contended that the Ao-Naga custom, norms, system of administration, marriage rules, the *Ariju* and *Tsuki* (male and female dormitory) system were formulated at Chungliyiimti. By way of language, the Ao-Nagas are generally divided into the *Chungli* and *Mongsen* group. Further, there are variations in the functioning and nomenclature of the administrative system, traditional attire, tattooing and other practices from village to village. Yet, the basic principles underlying the social practices and norms of the Ao-Nagas remain the same. It consists of the values, practices and norms that is found in the Ao-Naga society and are unwritten. It is through the art of remembering and continuous usage that the Ao-Naga customary practices and norms find its value in the society. This includes the practice of exogamy (marriage outside the clan), observance of taboo and genna (known as *anempong*). All customs were of equal importance as the Ao-Nagas considered that if one custom is broken, all other customs will also be destroyed. Therefore, much of the customs and usage of the Ao-Nagas are retained and practiced even today. This paper is an attempt to understand better about the traditional marriage system of the Ao-Nagas and the formation of a family which is regarded as the most important social

institution of the Ao-Nagas. It is a universally accepted truth that family is the first social unit in any culture and the sustenance and progress of a society depends upon the nature of functioning of its various institutions like family, kinship, institution of marriage and matrimonial laws and customs. For the Ao-Nagas, the family (*kibong*) is the most important social institution. The norms regarding the family are, therefore, the basis on which Ao-Naga society is founded. Many scholars have mentioned about the traditional social customs of the Ao-Nagas but detailed primary information has not been gathered. There are certain customary matrimonial process, customary laws, rites and rituals, taboo and gennas to be performed and fulfilled in various stages pertaining to marriage that is to be recorded systematically and in detail. This paper emphasizes on the traditional marriage system of the Ao-Nagas and various practices and norms related to it. There has been continuity and changes on the traditional marriage practices of the Ao-Nagas over time. As Christianity had tremendously influence the life of the Ao-Nagas, certain rituals and customs are now discarded.

Key words:- *Naga, Tattoo, Kidong, Ariju, Tsuki, Morung, Marriage, Tradition, rites, rituals, genna, kibong,*

Introduction:

The Ao-Nagas is one of the many tribes of Nagaland, north of India. The Ao-Naga tribe itself is not homogeneous but it is divided into six major clans, followed by many sub-clans. The following clans such as *Pongen, Longkumer, Walling* and *Jamir* of the *Chungli* group; *Imchen, Walling* and *Longchar* of the *Mongsen* group forms the six major clans. The Ao-Naga tribe form major populace of Mokokchung district. The geographical distribution of the Ao region is bounded by the *TsulaRiver, Sangtam, Chang* and *Phom* tribes on the east; the *Lotha* tribe, the Assam plains on the west; *Konyak* tribe in the north and the *Sema* tribe in the south. The entire Ao territory is divided into six ranges (*Tsukong*), each having a name comprising of several villages. The ranges run parallel to one another and are called: the *Ongpangkong*, the *Langpangkong*, the *Asetkong*, the *Changkikong*, the *Japukong* and the *Tsurangkong*. The Ao-Nagas consists of many villages and sub clans where they have their own rules and customary laws. The AOs falls under language group representing *Mongsen, Chungli, Changki* and *Sangpur*. However the major languages of the Ao-Naga are *Mongsen* and *Chungli*.

The AOs have their own myth of origin which has been preserve in their oral tradition. According to legend and tradition, the AOs originated from *Lungterok* (six stones) which is located near *Chungliyimti* which now lies in the *Sangtam* areas. From there they have traversed the River *Tikhu* and migrated to the present location. It is believed that the pairs emerged from the *Lungterok* who gradually developed in to three Ao clans. The first pair which emerged from the stone was *Tongpok* with his sister *Lendina*. *Tongpok* is considered as the ancestor of *Pongen* clan. The second pair *Longpok* and his sister *Yongmenla*, was believed to be the ancestor of *Longkumer* clan. *Longjakrep*, who is considered as the ancestor of *Jamir*clan is believed to have emerged along with his sister *Elongshe*. Since they preferred marriage outside their clan, *Tongpok* married *Elongshe*, *Longpok* married *Lendina* and *Longjakrep*

married *Yongmenla* (Mills 1973). It is believed that the Ao-Naga customs, norms, system of administration, marriage rules, the *Ariju* and *Tsuki* system were formulated at *Chungliyimti* (Das 1993).

Like any other tribal in India, the Ao-Nagas have no written records; they sustained and endured on oral traditions that were passed down by word of mouth through generations. The American missionaries who were Archaeologist, ethnographers and sociologist left an excellent monograph from which we could get important information and study them along with other works done by the Naga scholars and bring about an assessment of the traditional system of the Ao-Nagas.

The family in the Ao-Naga society:

Marriage has always been considered as a universal institution. It is founded in all societies all over the world. The institutions of marriage control and regulate the life of mankind. It is through this institution that the sexual and procreative needs of individuals are satisfied in a legal and customary manner. The sustenance and progress of a society depends upon the nature of functioning of its various institutions like family, kinship, institution of marriage and matrimonial law and customs. Marriage is conceptualized in three ways, as an institution, as a rite/ritual and as a process. As an institution, marriage consists of a set of patterned behaviours, expectations and relationships that are organised and endured overtime. As a rite and ritual, it includes ceremonies through which married status is achieved which are marked by gradual changes that led to ultimate dissolution through separation, divorce and death (Thakur 2004).

Marriage is always considered to be one of the important stages in the life of every Indian society. In northeast India too, the tribal consider marriage as an important element which not only influences fertility and population growth but affects the nature of the family relationship and it's linked to the status of women too. For the Ao-Nagas too, the family is the social unit and the most important social institution on which the Ao-Naga institution was founded. Family is regarded as the most important unit of society and marriage is the foundation of it. According to Tajen Ao (1980), in his book '*Ao-Naga customary law*' describes Ao marriage as a social contract. Temsula Ao (2002) in her book, '*The Ao-Naga oral tradition*' cites marriage as a contract of consent.

The identities of the Ao-Naga lie in the legitimate family (*kibong*) only by the custom of marriage (*kiyimba*). The Ao-Naga believed that the marriage law (*kibalembuba ozung*) was framed and passed by the ancestor at *Chungliyimti*. It is interesting to know that in a traditional community, the conduct of a society is governed by the customary law that contains do's and don'ts based on its norms, practices and usages mechanism such as taboo, social rituals, culture and ethics. These norms restrained their behaviours and regulate the social, cultural and religious aspects of the individual and the family. Thus marriage gave rise to social as well as legal obligations. Its serve as a regulatory mechanism as well as foundation for building families, kinship relations and clan. Those who violated the norms were penalized and excommunicated from the village. The Ao-Nagas have patriarchal society where in the father heads the family and he can have only one wife at a time and all the children carry their respective father's clan name. Even after marriage, an Ao woman does not lose her clan identity. The

marriage system of the Ao-nagas is exogamous marriage. And asymmetrical marriage that is marriages between parallel cousins is strictly prohibited. The Ao-Naga families resides in separate household and each household is responsible for its own upkeep and nurturing of children (Temsula, 2019).

The Dormitory system:

Boys from 10 years onward lived in *Ariju* (boy's dormitory) with other boys of his village. There they were taught, trained and disciplined in various matters relating to their socio-cultural life. The *tsuki* was to the girls what *Ariju* was to men. Here an unmarried woman or a widow, who was *Tsukiputsula*, was to stay and act as the warden of the young girls and educate them about social etiquettes and the art of weaving or basket making. The *Tsukiputsula* also taught about the marriage, with which clan they could marry and how to carry on one's life according to tradition and culture. In the *morung* (*Ariju*) members of every clan slept together but in (*tsuki*) women's dormitory, only women of the same clan slept together. There were different *tsuki* for all clans. The members of the *morung* visited *tsuki* according to the clan that they can marry. A man did not go and visited their own clan's *tsuki* for example; a Jamir clan never visited *Jamir tsuki* but went to *Longkumer* or *Pongen* or *Imsong* clan's *tsuki*¹. All these shows how the Ao-Nagas maintained and exogamous marriage system right from the start.

Maintaining one's clan identity:

The identity of a man and woman were also shown by the shawls, mekhalas and ornaments they wore. The *Jamir/Imchalar/Jatilar* women wore a mekhala called '*Imchatsudong*'. The *Longkumer* clan women wore a mekhala called '*Ayoklar tsu*'. The *Pongen / Imsong* mekhala was called '*Kheranur*'. The mekhalas of all the clans have different patterns. The women wore their own designated clan's mekhalas and that's how women were identified to which clan they belong to and that's how a man can identify the clan of a woman to whom he can marry. The *Chungli Mongsen* women have different patterns of tattoos. The *Chungli* women used black yarn (*kubok*) whereas *Mongsen* women tie their hair with white yarn². Likewise in order to identify a man of his clan different type and kinds of ornaments were worn for example, men belonging to *Jamir* clan wore only one armlet called '*Kumpang*' and men from *Longkumer* clan wore two '*Kumpang*' and the *Imsong/Pongen* men wore two armlet and an armlet made of iron.

(1) Rarentemjen Jamir, personal communication, May 9, 2022.

(2) Imolemba Jamir, personal communication, May 10, 2022.

Besides rich men and warriors wore a shawl called '*Tsungkotepsu*' which was a status sample. That's how men were identified of one's clan.

Taboos on marriage:

When a man visits a *tsuki* continuously and spends time with a particular women in charge of *tsuki* (*tsukibutsula*) notices the liking and the courtship between the two of them. The *tsukibutsula* inspects whether the marriage between the two person would be a blessed one or not because in the olden days, there were some clans though they can marry each other, if there was family feuds between the two families during the forefathers time or some untoward incident happened to either of the families then

that marriage would not be considered a blessed one and it was believed that the curse would continue into the newly wedded family too³. Therefore even if a man and a woman like each other but if the parents disagree after checking the background then they do not pursue with the marriage. Marriage between close cousins is also not allowed though they may belong to different clans (e.g. maternal uncles, sons or daughters). In such cases, marriage was possible only after a gap of three generations. Moreover if a man and a woman from the same clan live together, it is known as '*tinupongtep*' meaning brother and sister cohabiting together. They were expelled from the village and he loses his rights of ownership and inheritance in joint properties with relatives (Sosang, 2012). The children of '*tinupongtep*' were considered as non-citizens of the village and therefore were disallowed to participate in any event. They were not entitled to inherit any ancestral properties. Even their dead body were not allowed to be buried in the common graveyard as well.

There are some clans though they can marry, their union was not considered as a blessing which is called '*lembu-masuk*'. The offspring of such a union usually had some genetic disorder. For example in Mopungchuket Village, Ozukum and Longkumer clan are considered as '*lembu-mazuk*' till today⁴. Intermarriage between some villages were prohibited as it was believed that such marriages may produce bad offspring and either of the parents may not have long life. The reason for this prohibition was that during olden days there were feuds and head hunting between those villages and so marriages between such villages were denied and considered as '*lembu-mazuk*'.

(3) Mfulila, personal communication, March, 2022.

(4) Alem Ozukum, personal communication, April, 2021.

In Ungma village, marriages with Longjang and Mopungchuket villagers were restricted and considered as taboo⁵. In olden days, parents didn't want their children to live far away from them that is why marriage with other far flung villages or from other ranges were mostly restricted. They didn't want to bury their children in another village. They wanted to share the same graveyard that was one of the reasons why marriages between faraway villages were denied⁶.

Engagement and marriage:

Once the choice is made, the first proposal for marriage is made by the boy to marry a girl. A formal proposal (*Ani-sung*) of marriage will be brought by some members of the boys extended families. In the olden times, such overtures were accompanied by a token gift which tended to vary from village to village. In some, it was fish, freshly caught by the boy which is called *kila-ngo* and a parcel of salt. In others, it was an axe like implement in common use among the Ao-Nagas called a *dao*. Such a *dao* is usually called a *Senmen Nok*. The boy's family sometimes gifts paddy of rice as gifts which is called *Anisung-tsuk*. If the gift is accepted, the marriage is settled and a date is fixed for the occasion. The bride also gives a shawl to the boy as a sign of her acceptance. Generally, as soon as the engagement was completed, the boy would start collecting building materials for their new home. Even after '*Anisung*', the two engaged persons were prohibited to meet or cohabit before marriage. If the engagement is to be

broken, after the acceptance of the gift by the girl's family, such a separation is considered as equivalent to a divorce and is settled according to rules governing divorce among the Aos. When a Man gets married, it is known as '*Ki ayim*' which means a man builds a new house and brings a new bride that's why he is called '*Kiyim sang*' and when a woman gets married it is called '*Ki-i-ao*' which means that a woman is going to live in the new house with a man for her whole life and so she is called '*Kiyimla*'⁷.

There were certain rituals which were performed according to tradition by close friends (usually two) of the groom on this occasion. They bring three hearth stones from the hills and plant them in the new hearth. They also bring six pot stands and six bamboo cylinders for storing waters. One of the friends brings a jug of rice brew and keeps it in the house. The groom's father brings a fine rooster. The bride's family provides a woven basket (of Bamboo and cane) which contains new clothes. Other things like cooking utensils and

(5) Supongkala Walling, personal communication, Sungratsu, May, 2022.

(6) I. Temjen Jamir, personal communication, Ungma, May 2022.

(7) Imtione, personal communication, Mongsenyimti, May, 2022

the ingredients for cooking like salt, chillies and other spices were provided by both the families (Temsula, 1999). As narrated by Mr Panyang Ozukum of *Mopungchuket* village, during the marriage the groom wore groin cloth (*langtem*), and the bride wore their clan's mekhala. It was not an elaborate expensive wedding like today. They butchered a pig or two and celebrated. Some poor families conducted their marriage ceremony in the afternoon after returning from their field⁸. The rituals relating to marriage all depended on the economic well-being of the family. The rites and rituals in the Ao-Naga society varies a bit from village to village. On the day of wedding, the bride carries a cane basket in which she puts wooden spoons, wooden seat (*makem*), plate, spades, *dao*, hand weeder (*alulem*), salt, bamboo shoot, chilly, two big chunks of meat for the peer mates to cook and eat in the house the next morning. The best friend of the groom cuts the meat and the bride maids cook for all. If the bride is rich, she brings four or five wooden rice basket to her new home. On the marriage day, the bride's clan women will see her till her new home while the aunts of the groom awaits welcoming her with songs after making fire at the new hearth. During the welcoming ceremony, one chunk of meat was cooked to feast and the other chunk was cut into two pieces and was given to the eldest aunt of the groom which is still practised at *Mopungchuket* Village⁹. The boy's father kills the rooster he had brought earlier and examines it's entrails to protect the future for the new couple (Temsula, 1999). After all this have been done, the relatives from both the sides sits together to have a meeting (*jeptsu*) in order to encourage and warn the married couple of all the circumstances of life and let them know of the customary laws that abides them. Traditionally, from the day of the marriage for seven days, the boy does not sleep with his wife. On the seventh day, the rice brew which his friends have brought is taken out and drunk. These seven days complete his last period of abstinence and on the eighth day only, he can consummate his marriage and thus a new life begins for the couple. It is to be noted that there was no joint family system from the olden days among the nagas. Joint family system was considered as a curse. It was believed that either one of the family members dies without attending a full-fledged lifespan and even the newly married family does not live to the standard of others since they leaned and

depended too much upon the parents. That is why joint family system was never encouraged and before marriage a new house was built for the newly married couple where they start their new life.

(8)

S. Pangyang Ozukum, personal communication, Mopungchuket, April, 2021.

(9)

S. Alem Ozukum, personal communication, Mopungchuket, April, 2021.

Types of marriages:

Apart from normal marriages, there are some types of marriages which were taken up by the customary law if the marriage is not according to the law.

(i) Voidable marriage:

Elopement (*Jutep Kiyim*), *jutep* means stealthy mating, *kiyim* means marriage. This occurs when both parents of either side do not favour the marriage on any grounds. When a girl or a boy after a formal engagement is done run away with another boy/girl a fine has to be paid to the girl's parent and the person who marries the girl is liable to pay fines (*kelamet*) or the boy who leaves his lover is liable to pay the same fine. When a man commits adultery with another's wife and they subsequently become man and wife then they are declared as adulterers and liable to pay a heavy *kelamet*. If a man with or without wife lives with another man's wife and commits adultery, and if the husband decides to leave his wife and if she leaves with the other man, it is called *kelamet kiyim*. On payment of *kelamet* fines the marriage is declared regularized. The man and woman will be fined with six pigs by the clan. If a girl is impregnated by a man before marriage and has not disclosed this, such a marriage can be deemed void provided, the victim pays *kelamet* of seven pigs and is not divorce (Sosang, 2012).

(ii) Void marriage:

Marriages which are prohibited by customs are regarded as void. They are dealt with severe penalty for immorality. Marriage within the same clan or family is endogamy. The husband and wife of endogamous marriage are heavily punished with pig fines and they are expelled from village. According to Tajen Ao (1980), the functions of village authority are highly commendable as it is due to their vigilance that immorality is timely suppressed. He further adds by saying that there are cases of endogamous marriage but so far there is no case of bigamous marriages among the Aos. If a man is found living with another woman while he has his wife then he is given orders by village authority to give up the other woman. If he divorces his wife and continues to live with the other woman he is not liable. If however, he does not obey the order he is ousted from the village.

A man living with another woman as his wife by deserting his own wife without affecting divorce or without giving reason, such marriage is also void. Void marriages such as endogamous, bigamy and marriages by desertion are seen as most seriously immoral and unethical among the Aos since ancient times and are dealt with severe penalty. The victim have only two choices, either expulsion from village with no acceptance anywhere and become wanderer or to abide by customary law under the vigilant village authority¹⁰.

Taboos and norms during pregnancy and childbirth:

For pregnant women, food was cautiously consumed and she was abstains from all food forbidden to her. If she finds a tasty beetle in the fields she may not bring it up for supper tucked into her skirt at the

waist, or her child will be born with a birth-mark; she must bring it tied in a corner of her cloth so that it does not touch her (Mills, 1926). Husband was not allowed to kill animal like snake, tiger, even pig or chicken, otherwise it was believed that the child will look like them. This kind of practices is still followed though there are some changes in the present time. It was tabooed not to entertained guest for five or six days during child birth. Even villagers and best friends were not allowed because some evil spirit might come and touch the child or bad winds (*mopung tamajung*) will enter the house and the child and the mother will get sick or die. The reasons are, the weakness in their health will make them difficult their breath of the outsiders. Abstinence was maintained between the wife and the husband during this period.

After a couple gives birth, the family members would go for fishing and only fishes with scales were caught. If it was a boy, then the fishes were covered by six banana leaves, and if it was a girl the fishes were covered in five banana leaves. The fishes wrapped in those banana leaves were roasted and on the third day of the birth, the parents put a little bit of fish on the baby's mouth and then they prayed to their God and blessed the baby by saying 'let the baby be cleanse and pure like the fish'. That morning itself the baby's ears were pierced and cotton roll was put by either grandparents or aunt. The piercing of ears is to denote that the child belongs to 'man' and therefore the hole in the ear is the mark of his appropriation. After the piercing of the ear, the baby was named. The name was given basing on whether the child's forefathers were warriors, a person who gave feast of married or village elder. Thus namesakes were given accordingly. Every clan have their own names and every respective clan name a baby with their own clan's name¹¹.

Divorce and remarriage:

Divorce in the Ao-Naga culture was simple affairs with the relatives from party acting as judges. The divorce took place for certain reasons like want of male issue, poverty, interference by their parents or relatives in the affairs of the family, adultery, unsound mind, ill treatment and desertion (Sosang, 2012). In the case of constant disagreement among the couple, the person who asks for a divorce would take away only that he/she brought in during marriage and leave the rest to the other. If a divorce happened in the case of man

(10). Marnokden Jamir, personal communication, Chuchuyimlang, May, 2022.

(11). Imtilepzuk, personal communication, Changtongya, May, 2022.

committing adultery, he would take just his *dao*(machete), spear and his plate and leave the remaining assets for his wife. But if the wife has committed adultery, she would take nothing, not even the household items with her except those that were brought by her on the day of her marriage from her parent's house (*Aoer Temzung ozung*, 2016).

After a divorce, a man and woman can remarry. During the divorce, all the household goods were divided among them according to their needs. The household goods made of iron were not given to women. Women were allowed to take her clothes, hen and chickens, wooden rice pounder (*sempi*), the wooden seat (*makem*) and fire woods and the second year of harvest from the same field (*maipu*)

belongs to the women and the women also had share in the reserved grains to be sown the next season (*mapoktentsu*)¹².

Inheritance:

Within Ao traditional law, it is always the male descendants of the parents who inherit all the achieved and ascribed properties of the parents. This property did not only include landed properties but even heirlooms such as beads and ornaments. Women had no right to inherit or transfer property. They could not inherit ancestral landed property held by their fathers. The property handed to them was in the form of gifts (*nungo*) and not as a rightful inheritance (*senmang*). At her death, all her ascribed property could be transferred back to her father's heirs. This practice is tied to the Ao system of marriage, where the woman has to marry a person from another clan. The denial of inheritance rights to women ensures that the ancestral property owned by a clan is not transferred to another clan through marriage. Nevertheless, the lack of inheritance right limits the financial options which women have and make them dependent on men their father, husband or male heirs of their families to gain any access to necessary capital. Even to this day, Ao customary laws do not have provisions allowing women to rightfully claim inheritance from their parents¹³.

The Position of women:

Women of the Ao community played an integral part in moulding and shaping the society, they acted as care giver and educator to the young kids until they entered the *morungs*. Women were a mainstay of the agricultural labour which sustained these communities. Apart from these, they were also involved in unpaid domestic labour. The

(12). Takotuba Tzudir, personal communication, Molungyimsen, May, 2022.

(13). Supongkala Walling, personal communication, Sungratsu, May 2022.

women in Ao-Naga society had considerable visibility, accessibility and security but they still do not have much stack within the decision making process in the public or political arena.

Several writers have pointed out the traditional Ao-Naga society as being egalitarian and gender equal but it has to be noted that it is far from being truly egalitarian. For centuries, as narrated in the fable of *Lungterok*, no women were never included in the *Putu Menden* of the Ao society. The AOs are a patriarchal society.

The women's position however considerably improved over the years. Earlier, a woman's position and her participation in the society were very limited. Her role in the society was to be a caretaker to her husband and children. A woman was meant to possess womanly traits from her childhood to her adulthood. She did not have access to public platforms and organisations. The only social institutions existing in the earlier days was the *tsuki* for the girls which educated women on social etiquettes and womanly arts such as basket making, weaving, pottery and others.

Conclusion:

The paper has attempted to provide an insight into the practices and norms related to the traditional marriage system within traditional Ao-Naga society. The family (*kibong*) was the most important social institution, the basis on which Ao-Naga society is founded. But with the advent of the new religion,

marriage ceremonies are now performed in churches, printed invitation cards are used and the period of abstinence after marriage is no longer practised. And only female's ears are pierced for facilitating wearing of jewellery later. On the other hand, the abiding legacy of the tradition is that the Ao family is still a discrete and independent unit of society and all the important consideration regarding the norms of the institution called marriage are strictly adhered to, for e.g., the taboo regarding marriage between clan members, absence of dowry or bride price.

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