

## Tsungkotepsu: Gendered Artefacts And Continuity Of Gender Hierarchy

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### Abstract:

Artefacts and costumes can symbolize class and social status. It can also help realize an objective or those exclusively for creative purposes. Material culture gives us information about a certain culture, the time, place and people involved in the production. Material culture in addition informs the symbolic change and continuity of the commodity in question. It goes on to construct people and their identity. Gender is usually defined as a socially fashioned and traditionally varied force. Gender cannot be understood plainly in terms of male and female activities because there are no out of sorts cultural findings of what comprises men's or women's experiences. Manliness and womanliness, as features of gender are only varied possibilities which appeared in history, symbolically and even situationally. Locating upon the Tsungkotepsu and its demarcation of gender identity, the paper would argue that gender hierarchy among the Ao Naga continues unchallenged and unchanged from the traditional times wherein Ao Naga women are still excluded, bracketed and prohibited from certain male domains.

Key words: Artefacts, Material culture, Gender Hierarchy, Continuity.

"Images, representations and crafted expression of ideas are important not only for their beauty, virtuosity or intrinsic value but also because they are indicators of social position and power"

Carolyn Korsmeyer

### **Introduction**

The Nagas are generally known for their colourful shawls and clothes since the days of the ancestors. Traditional attires have changed with modernization and western influence; nevertheless most Naga tribes still preserve and use their traditional clothes if not as daily wear but on occasions of traditional festivities. Naga

tribal identity is distinguished by the patterns of their shawls. The patterns of the shawls and the ornaments also signify gender appropriate attires, social status and clan identity.

Tsungkoteptsu is a shawl for the Ao Naga men and prohibited to be worn by women. Tsungkoteptsu has incorporated symbols of lion, tiger, human head, rooster, and mithun, spears and dao (traditional knife) either painted or embroidered. The patterns of the Tsungkoteptsu varied for a warrior and/or wealthy man. Patterns of head skulls and mithun could be worn only by warriors who had taken head in head-hunting raids and rich men who had hosted a sacrifice and fed the whole village. Tsungkoteptsu was associated with male activities and their identity.

Ao Naga women were prohibited to wear men's costume; especially the one's earned in merit and Tsungkoteptsu is one such costume. There was prominent demarcation of men and women clothing which continues even today despite the forces of modernization in the forms of education and the new religion that has penetrated Ao society.

Locating upon the Tsungkoteptsu and its demarcation of gender identity, I would argue that gender hierarchy among the Ao Naga continues unchallenged and unchanged from the traditional times wherein Ao Naga women are still excluded, bracketed and prohibited from certain male domains.

Artefacts can symbolize class and social status. It can also help realize an objective or those exclusively for creative purposes. Material culture gives us information about a certain culture, the time, place and people involved in the production. Material culture in addition informs the symbolic change and continuity of the commodity in question. It goes on to construct people and their identity. When we study material culture and commodities at large, we cannot escape but look at the means of production a community employs. Hence the production pattern would be necessary to study, since as in any other society, the Naga society in general or Ao society in particular have modes of production in accordance to its clan membership and the position they hold in the social strata. It would be interesting to note here that the patterns and designs they produce also depend on the status and clan membership of the individual.

### **Gendered Artefacts**

The phrase "material culture" is a broad one, defined in different ways by various scholars. Perhaps the simplest way to define the term is that material culture represents the "things" or the "stuff" which we create and use on a daily basis, the "material" products of a culture. These "things" could range from the clothes in your closet to the dishes in your kitchen, large and often-costly items such as our cars and homes to less-expensive mundane artefacts like pocket knives or even the contents of our kitchen trash can. Some artefacts might be stylish, and others much less so. Some might be readily available and mass-produced, while others might be heirlooms or hand-crafted items. Some artefacts denote our class and social status, while others simply help us accomplish a specific goal or even just to have fun. Most importantly, material culture tells us about a place and a time, about the people who created or used the artefacts, about change over time.

The term material culture encompasses immobile properties such as buildings, manufactured artefacts consumer goods, jewellery etc. these material goods acquire a meaning when observed within a particular cultural and social context (Sridevi, 2005). In every culture, material artefacts are integral part of the process of socio-cultural transmission. Belief and value as well as norm and role can be conveyed through objects and artefacts as well as language and behaviour (Brock, 1980).

All through societies, we find demonstrations of the ways kin relations intervene and are mediated by contact with material resources. Systems for the transmission of resources through the kin group function rather unequally. In a number of societies the kinship group is vital in deciding access to utilizing the property. Kinship norms for these societies, regarding inheritance of such rights and pattern of after marriage habitation have significant effects on the power stability among men and women.

Perhaps gender could be considered as the social creation of disparity between men and women. Therefore it is socially shaped and traditionally detailed. Instead of merely responding to social construct, gender can thus fuel transformation. Gender studies classify male and female activities, roles, relationships and cultural imagery according to the social and sexual division of a given society. It does not just study women, it also aims at a more comprehensive, humanistic and sensitive study of the lives of men and women in the past. Because gender studies often focuses on the day to day playing out of domestic roles, it may offer a more

accessible theoretical study, which deals less with abstract processes and more with the intimacies of human lives.

Gender is usually defined as a socially fashioned and traditionally varied force. Gender cannot be understood plainly in terms of male and female activities because there are no out of sorts cultural findings of what comprises men's or women's experiences. Manliness and womanliness, as features of gender are only varied possibilities which appeared in history, even situationally. Gender describes ways in which specific functions and relations are socially built, mainly in connection to the productive and material world. The general view of women in any Naga town or village is of them going to their workplace. The sights of this in towns are commonly of women headed to government offices, shops and vegetable vendors or markets. Commodities are held in large bamboo baskets by the women from the village, on the back sustained by a head-band across the fore-head.

The day starts very early in the villages. The women go to toil in the fields and to gather firewood with their farming and chopping implements. Water is obtained either from the natural springs or from the community reservoir. During rainy months and after the harvest is over they weave cloth on the back –strap loom when they are not occupied in other agricultural activities. Large bamboo woven mats are used for drying paddy and the womenfolk' keeps a watch on it while sewing out the cloths. Family earnings are supplemented by weaving within the domestic unit. Girls, from very young age, acquire knowledge of weaving in a toy loom all through the parched and sunny winter months.

### **Socialization of Ao Girls and Boys**

An Arijū<sup>1</sup> was an institution where the boys normally above 12 years of age were trained and learned under the senior boys. They stayed there till they were married. It was housed in a building called Arijū Ke. Aspects of it were later found in the modern school, especially the boarding school. A Mephu contains more than one Arijū. Each is occupied by one or more clans and each is a unit of one mephu. Unmarried boys of the same clan or clans lived and slept in the Arijū of their clans. Each Arijū had its own

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<sup>1</sup> *The popular name used is morung. This is a term used for the institution as found among all the Naga tribes. Aos call it Arijū, Lothas call it Champo, Angamis call it Kichuki. In English it is referred to as a bachelors dormitory*

name such as Senten Riju, Pongen Riju, etc. Though the boys ate with their parents in their houses, they were educated and also worked in the Ariju (T.Ao:1980:pg.14).

An Ariju was a place where war expeditions were planned and weapons made, and where every enemy head was brought after a successful raid. The members of the Ariju represented the chief fighting force of a village. After the British prohibited inter-village warfare the Ariju remained the centre of village social life for men for a long time. Women were not permitted to enter the Ariju on any occasion (Ganguly: 1885:pg.115). As Mills wrote, "it is of course forbidden for a woman to enter it"(Mills:1926:pg.67). Hence, women were excluded from one of the community's most important social and cultural institutions. In case of Nuer society as mentioned by Pritchard, men who wore 'leopard skin' on their shoulders were considered as chiefs or in the language of those days 'Shaikhs' or 'Sultans' through whom the government might conduct its administration. These chiefs were considered as persons with traditional ritual functions (Pritchard: 1974: pg.291).

The age group played an important role in the social life of the Aos. The whole village is divided into age groups to which various communal duties are assigned. The age group system is, in brief, as follows: every three years a new group of boys born within the same years enter the Ariju. A boy remains in his original age group till he dies.

For girls too, on attaining puberty they no longer slumbered in their parents' homes. They spend their nights in the Zuke, which is the girls' sleeping house. The house of a widow forms the Zuke for the girls of the widow's clan. Girls were instructed on many things in the Zuke, even as were the boys in the Ariju (Temjen: 1991: pg.1).

Girls aged between of 6 and 7 becomes suitable to belong to the youngest age group in her ward, in which there is an age difference upto 3 years between the youngest and oldest members. The older members in each age-set direct the younger ones and teach them daily tasks such as fetching water and wood , taking care of domestic animals , working in the fields and cooking .

Traditionally the younger girls have to keep their head shaven or very short. It is here that a girl received training in mannerisms, singing, dancing, running the household, weaving (and sometimes pottery making) and was instructed in traditional lore. When a girl

reached this stage she was allowed to grow her hair to a certain length and would also be tattooed on different parts of the body, usually the face, arms and legs, according to custom in certain Naga communities such as the Ao, Khamniungan, Yimchungru, Konyak .The tattooing and growing of hair was indicative of the marriageable status of a young girl. Among the Ao, tattooing a young girl also helped to differentiate her from slave girls, who had been captured from other villagers or communities during head-hunting raids and put to work on domestic and agricultural tasks (Aier, 1998,90).

In the recent times, amidst conversion to Christianity, the dormitory system has declined and is followed only by a marginal who still practise the primal religion. On the other hand, the age - group arrangement has sustained which offers abundant occasions for unmarried girls and boys to mingle, particularly on festivals and in rigorous cultivation activities whilst constituents of the age-group labours collectively to make money. Today such a prominent space could be the Christian youth clubs where boys and girls to work jointly.

Ao festivals were similar in character to the festivals of other Naga tribes. Most of them were correlative in culture and related to war, headhunting and the fertility of the land (corresponding with different agricultural seasons). Some festivals were celebrated by all the villages; others were unique to a particular village. The two most important festivals for the Aos are Moatsu and Tsungremmong

Moatsu was celebrated from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> of May every year, immediately after sowing was finished. It was the festival that marked the beginning of summer. The ceremonies associated with it were intended to appease the spirits and to persuade them to shower more blessings on the crops (Aier, 1967: pg.20). On this occasion boys and girls of different age groups rejoice by singing and dancing and making merry among themselves. They also exchange gifts. Young men received new dao belts from their lovers or admirers, and the young women in return got new tobacco pipes. This festival is marked, even today, with much singing, dancing and feasting by both men and women. It is also a time to wear that clothing which symbolizes the good deeds in their lives. Shawls like Tsungkotepsu could be worn by the warriors who had taken head or rich men who had offered feasts of merit.

An Ao man's elevated social status was further reflected in the architectural style and decorations of his house (Ganguly,1885: pg.130). Feast of merit could only be given by married men; however the wife played an honourable and conspicuous part throughout. The sacrificer was assisted in all the work by two formal friends who were not of the same clan as the sacrificer (Mills,1926: pg.257). Though women were not entitled to get honour, title and fame, in the songs sung at the feasts of merit, her name might be mentioned together with that of her husband. She would then be highly esteemed (Ao, 1980: pg.65).

The laws of inheritance were basically the same among all the Naga tribes. The line of succession is through the male, and no female was entitled to inherit any property, though she may possess property. Among the Aos the property goes from father to son, and if a man dies without a son, it will go to his brother's or brother's sons as the case may be. If there are no brother's sons, it will go to his father's brother's son and so on (Ghosh: 1979:pg.65). Thus, the women had no share in the inheritance of immovable property. She could, however, inherit moveable property such as ornaments, fowls, cloths, etc. She had the right to possess wealth, trade, increase the value of or sell her property in any way she saw fit. On her marriage, her separate property did not merge with that of her husband's. On the death of her husband leaving minor children, she became the owner of the family's property till her sons grew up. She could trade to earn for the family and get immovable property by the will of her parents, relatives and husband. But with regard to land, a woman could not inherit. As Tajen Ao puts it, "It is clearly contrary to custom for women to inherit in the Ao country"(Ao, 1980:pg.65).

A widow received a portion of the rice and the use of the house and as much as she required of her husband's land till death or remarriage, or till she became so infirm that her sons had to support her. Thus the widow was never left uncared for. Beads and crystal ear ornaments were valuable property passed on as follows. Those brought by her husband were the wife's only for life and went to him or his heirs after her death. Those she bought herself were her absolute property, and she could give them away to her daughter or anyone she liked. Of ornaments she had brought herself, any remaining with her at her death went to her father's heirs, her husband having no claim on them.

### **The Legacy of Weaving**

Women among the Naga are in charge of weaving cloth on body-strap looms for every purpose. A minimally constructed loom and effortlessly manageable however permits artistic command. A young girl was appreciated traditionally for her ability to weave and her competence to work in the fields. Her stay in the dormitory confirmed these attributes while doing collective effort in the fields and weaving gifts for a dear one. In rural areas these qualities still holds prominence whereas education and employment in the job sector have gained eminence. However, to date, a Naga woman's primary responsibility is considered to be the smooth management of her domestic unit, which relates to secure ration and cloth for the folks.

As girls opt for pursuing higher education instead of acquiring an expertise that entails a great deal of training and time, weaving has declined over the decades in towns and nearby villages. Also, there is no institutional arrangement to impart such skills to girls as part of normal grooming, with the disappearance of dormitory system. The other reason is that with the breakdown of the dormitory system, there is no institutional system to impart such skills to girls as a component of standard preparation. However, in families where the mother or some other relative still practices the art of weaving, the skills are handed down from generation to generation. Here though, it would be important to mention that women welfare committees teach school dropout girls to knit and weave so that they could make a livelihood.

#### **Traditional Nuances and Usages of Tsungkotepsu**

Nagas however diverse the ideals of splendour possible, the general spirit of enjoyment and pleasure derived from art are of the same order everywhere. Men, however hard their lives maybe, do not spend all their time and energies only in the acquisition of food and shelter nor do those who live under more favourable conditions and who are free to devote to their pursuits the time not needed for securing their sustenance do not occupy themselves with purely industrial works or idle away the days in indolence. Even the poorest tribes have produced work that gives to them aesthetic pleasure, and those whom a bountiful nature or a greater call of inventions have granted freedom from care, devote much of their energy to the creation of works of beauty.

Amongst the varieties of Naga decorative art, there are two distinguished styles each being the monopoly of the either sex. While the man's styles are solely expressed in the art of wood



carving, painting, basketry and other derivatives, the woman's style finds expression in weaving, embroidery and pottery.

Ao traditional male costumes are among the most beautiful of all Naga groups. Rich in symbolism and aesthetically pleasing, the warriors radiate immense dignity and pride. The women's jewellery with its rock-crystal earrings and carnelian beads has had a big influence on Naga adornment culture. The Ao were the first to adopt a monetary currency made of iron sticks called chabili to replace the barter system.

Although Christianity has seen to it that schools have replaced the most comprehensive educational function of the Morungs, they are nevertheless where elements of traditional Naga heritage such as the oral tradition, skills of hunting, cloth and handicraft weaving, jewellery and adornments, warfare skills were passed on to society's younger members.

The women made all the clothing for the whole family. Majumdar writes: 'Naga females spin yarn from cotton with which they weave cloth. Every family has a spinning wheel and a handloom for weaving purposes'. According to Smith, the Naga cloths of his time were considered the best fabrics produced by the simple loom. Cloth of a dark blue colour was in most common use, the dye being produced from the leaves of the hill indigo plant (Majumdar, 1924).

Aos were skilful wood carvers, considering the tools that were available to them. They made excellent carvings of human figures, tigers, hornbills, pythons, mithun heads, etc. with which the posts of the Arijus were adorned. They also made baskets and mats. Each family made its own baskets of various kinds, and large mats from split bamboo. They also made some pails of woven bamboo and reeds, which were rendered watertight by coating the inside with rubber sap. The village blacksmith made daos, spearhead and simple agricultural implements from iron which was brought from the plains. Thus, each household produced practically independent economically. In this traditional family economy the role of the woman as a producer was equally important with that of the man.

It is a fact that the Naga decorative art is limited to the decoration of their dress, their weapons, selected posts, their village gates, and their utensils. Whatever might be the limitation, it can in no

way undermine the beauty of the traditional Naga art. To appreciate it, however, one has to understand the hardships and difficulties under which the artisan had to work and struggle in the past.

In addition to this, the villages separated by thick jungles and deep rivers could not maintain regular contact and trade and as a result the artisan never thought of producing large quantity of handicrafts for commercial purposes. In most of the tribes, the head of the family even today is the basket maker, his wife the weaver for the members of the household, thus keeping every household self-sufficient. Added to this was the absence of official or private patronage and encouragement for the development of the art in the past.

Much of the Naga art is associated with religious beliefs and practices. So naturally with the spread of the new religion, that is, Christianity in Nagaland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the old beliefs and practices got to weaken gradually, and along with it, the art. The institution like bachelor's dormitory which in the past, rather prior to the spread of Christianity, was a guard house, recreation club, centre of education, art and discipline and held important ceremonial functions in the Naga society, became ineffective and even abandoned in many places. The elaborate carving on the posts of the houses of bachelor's dormitory and public house was found no longer necessary and as a result of which there was automatic negligence in the art of carving. It is beyond doubt that we owe tremendously to the American missionaries for the present Naga awakening, but then we cannot ignore the destructive missionary influence on the nag art, particularly the literary one. After embracing Christianity one would not be allowed to participate in dancing and singing of folk songs and instances of ex-communication of persons from church on the reason of participating in dancing and singing folk songs is not unknown. This was one of the main factors hostile to the development of literary art.

Sense of inferiority in the face of the commercial products of civilization is another unfavourable factor for the development of arts and crafts. The elaborately designed shawls of the Nagas are all woven in the primitive loin looms and the price of the finished goods is, therefore, extremely high. Similarly, machine products of wood craft are far superior to the hand made crude wooden platters. This difficulty can be overcome by providing modern

tools and implements to the local artisans at subsidised rate and by giving training facilities. The study on the few craft centres in Nagaland reveals that once facilities are given, the artisans are capable of not only developing the existing traditional art, but also discover new symbolic designs and patterns.

Disregarding the difficulties, the Nagas, who love colour and beauty, have succeeded in devising many patterns that are original and carrying them over in the midst of insecurities. The artistry and culture that distinguished the Naga people in many ways had been carried on through test of time and safely handed over to the living generation.

### **The Artistic Naga**

Dyeing and weaving is performed by women and every Naga woman is supposed to weave the cloths of her family. The cotton used is derived from the individual cotton fields. It is then cleaned off its seeds by being rolled on a flat stone with short stick used like a rolling-pin. This work of seeding is a tedious process which generally falls to the lot of women, those who being no longer able to go to field, eke out a scanty livelihood in this way.

For starching the yarn, the skeins are first damped with cold water and pounded vigorously on a wooden board with a rice pounder or a bamboo with the root portion cut level and next it is soaked in hot rice water for about ten to twenty minutes. When the skeins are thoroughly dried in the sun, the woman winds the thread into balls ready for weaving.

In case the yarn is to be dyed, the dyeing process takes place after the yarn is transferred into skeins. The indigenous colours are, in recent years, fading away and are replaced by chemical dyes. Further the easy availability of coloured thread in the market does not encourage the necessity of producing the old indigenous colours. The Nagas use dark blue, red and rarely yellow dye. The whole process is carried out by women who are also taboo among some tribes to handle any dye during pregnancy less the foetus be affected by the colour. Blue dye is obtained from the leaves of the *strobilanthes flaccidifolius*. This is a universal Naga dye and the plant is grown in the gardens in the outskirts of the village or in patches cleared in thick jungle.

Traditional shawls, adornments and clothes of the Nagas are popular even in the present days. These colourful shawls and kilts continue from the days of the ancestors. Even though, there is modern and western influenced attires, most of the Naga tribes still retain and use their traditional clothes if not as daily wear then on occasions that calls for dressing up. Traditional Naga society was distinguished by the clothes the members of the tribes wore. This observation can be said even today because each tribe has a distinct pattern of hand-woven cloth that identifies the wearer tribes. The males wore something like kilts, and colourful shawls were draped over the shoulders. Along with these garments, depending on one's clan and social status, some ornaments were worn. Social status was signified by the patterns and the ornaments; for instance, among the Ao Naga, the rich and the warriors had much coveted shawl called 'Tsongkotepsu' with painted or embroidered pictures of lion, tiger, human head, cock, spears, dao(the all purpose chopping tool, or traditionally, headhunting sword) and mithun.

Clothing for women was very simple. A kind of sarong was wrapped around the waist that covered the lower part of the body, while a shawl covered the upper part of the body. These clothes had their own distinctive patterns according to one's own clan. Ornaments in the form of earrings, bracelets, necklaces made of brass or iron; feathers of hornbills, boar's tusk were also used. The clothing for both males and females was hand woven. The dress and the ornaments represented the Naga people not only for practical reasons but to 'help make statements about, and to define, the identity of individuals and groups'.

Naga women are interested in colour and insist on getting the exact shades they prefer, though dependence on outside market for dyed yarns has inevitably modified their colour schemes in woven fabrics in recent years. Although external influences in colours and designs are evident, yet the main, the fabrics today retain their own attractive pattern. As woven design perforce is the direct result of interlocking a system of vertical called warp threads at the right angles to a system of horizontal threads called the weft, hence they are exclusively of an angular geometric type. The designs vary from a formal arrangement to lines to elaborate patterns of diamond and lozenge shapes. With the gradual break up of the Naga textile traditions, some of the designs are becoming a little fancy, their simplicity disturbed by the addition of more representational flowers and other ornamental motifs.

The simple and straight forward lines, stripes, squares and bands are the most traditional design motifs, their escape from monotony being affected by varying their size, colour and arrangement. Contrast and combination of colours are chosen expertly. If on skirts and shawls, the stripes and bands are usually horizontal; this is because of a fine eye to the way in which these lines of direction drape on the body when worn.

In recent years, familiar objects are often added to their original designs and the weavers have adopted a large number of designs of other tribes also, as a result the original symbols of their shawls have to a great extent destroyed. Different tribes of the Nagas have different shawls of their own design and within the same tribe everybody is not allowed to wear any type of shawl one prefers.

Naga shawls range from very simple cloth to the elaborately designed warrior or rich man's shawls. The ordinary cloth consists of a plain white and blue black cloth which can be worn by anybody without restriction. When the white cloth becomes old, it is dyed black and worn as a dark blue cloth.

The decorative warrior shawl *Tsungkotepsu* is one of the most characteristics cloths of the Aos. On a general dark base, the cloth has a median white band and on the either end side of it are horizontal bands of contrasting black, red and white. There are five broad red bands close together at the top and bottom, six narrow red bands close to the broad white median band. The median band is painted or embroidered with a pattern in black which includes figures of mithun symbolising wealth of the owner, elephant and tiger to symbolise valour of the man, human head representing the success in head hunting and a few other things like spear, dao and cock. This is an exclusive male shawl and could be worn only by one who has taken heads in war or offered mithun sacrifice, a community feast performed in Naga society by well-to-do men). Another shawl worn on festive occasions by men of wealth or the sons and daughters of wealthy men is *Aomelep su*, in which dog's hair dyed red is woven at regular intervals so as to make the shawl appear shaggy in spots. This shawl is woven in stripes of red, yellow and black alternating.

The Ao women's skirt or sarong consists of cloth nearly one and a quarter meter long and about two thirds of a meter deep wrapped round the waist with the top outer corner tucked in just in front of

the left hip. It is impossible to describe all the varieties of the sarong for they vary from village to village, phratry to phratry and even clan to clan in the same village. The daughter of a man who has done the mithun sacrifice or feast of merit waves a different pattern on her sarong and more elaborate than does the daughter of a poor man and the sarong of the wife of a man who has done the feast of merit is more heavily ornamented than that of the poor man's wife, the extra ornamentation on the sarong of a rich man's wife differing in detail from that of the sarong of the rich man's daughter. It is further to be noted that in the event of marrying a poor man, a rich man's daughter does not lose her right to the particular pattern which her father's wealth gained for her. Some of the more important and popular Ao sarongs include: Azu Jangnuo su mostly of red and black stripes with a little yellow in the black stripes. The poor may have only one design woven into each of the two breadths. The wife and daughters of a rich man may wear sarongs having three or more designs woven into each of the two breadths. Ngami su or fish tail sarong is one in which certain dark coloured threads are broken off at a certain place and short pieces of red thread are substituted, so that when the weaving is finished, the figure bears some resemblance to a fish tail in the otherwise black cloth. There may be few or many of these figures in one sarong. Yongzujang Su or cucumber seed sarong is woven in red on a black background. The designs on the cloth looks like seeds of cucumber.

A great deal of the wood carvings of the Nagas is associated with religious beliefs and practices and it is natural that when such beliefs and practices weaken under the influence of modern civilization and introduction of Christianity, the art also weakens with them. The art of carving wood, which is as old as their history, may be considered primarily under the practice of head-hunting and Morung institution or bachelor's dormitory.

Head-hunting is no longer practiced now, but it formed the basis of the cultural and religious life of the Naga people in the bygone days. To take a human head in a raid was the greatest honour for a man for it conferred him the right to wear certain dresses and ornaments, not entitled to others. Carvings on the beams and pillars of a warrior's house and Morung primarily include human heads, paintings of such other objects on the doors of village gate and certain warrior shawls show that head-hunting is not only the inspiration of the art of carving but paintings as well.

### **Tsungkotepsu: Continuity of Gender Hierarchy**

The Naga people today are faced by an unprecedented evolutionary crisis in their history. The changes initiated by the colonials and Christian missionaries have their varied impact upon the vitality of the Naga culture. It is rather unfortunate that, even today there are a considerable section of people even in India to whom the Nagas meant nothing else than headhunting, dense jungles, naked people, feathers and spears and rebellion. It is no longer jungles or naked people. It is now a land of friendly human beings, brave, kind, intelligent and talented. The changed circumstances can be aptly described by affirming that for those who view Nagaland or Nagas from the old anthropological texts even today, it would be difficult to believe that Nagas are no more primitive show pieces. They still retain old dances, old customs, picturesque costume and old folklore when occasion demands. Nagas however, do not ignore the new rhythm, new ditties, modern jazz, short-cut costumes etc. One of the most important aspects of progress is in the field of education. Education, as it spread, revolutionised the social and economic conditions of the Nagas. It helped generate new talents and skills.

Improved communications, easy accessibility of markets and free contact with the outside world have led to the import of many manufactured articles. Enamel mugs and plates for example have replaced the old bamboo and wooden platters which were often skilfully crafted. The indigenous earthen pots have been replaced by aluminium and steel plates. Hymns have taken the place of the old folk songs and dances are being forgotten. The cessation from head-hunting and the gradual disappearance of the various kinds of Feast of Merit led to the decay of Morung institutions and maintenance of the village gates which suffered the wood carving profession. The need to weave a particular shawl for a particular class of warriors of rich men is no longer there. As a matter of fact there are dozens of old shawl designs which are no longer made or woven. Preparation of local dye is no longer alive because of the cheap colours that are easily available in the markets.

In the midst of these changes, it is inevitable that the art of the Nagas would naturally decline. However, the tradition of weaving is being maintained and more designs are discovered. Nearly all the Naga women retain much of their hand-woven dress, and there is the general appreciation of the original designs of hand-woven shawls and sarongs even among the modern Naga girls. A

sense of history has awakened among the Nagas with an urge to record their folk tradition be it poems, stories, artefacts etc.

As a response to the missionaries' efforts to Christianity, Naga people got converted in an overwhelming movement. Today, Christianity is the established and the defining religion of the Naga people. The form of Christianity embraced by the Naga people was one defined by the western missionaries' worldview and normative. This Christianity demanded a rejection of the traditional Naga religion of the people. The spread and method employed by the missionaries were complete rejections of the natives' way of life. Conversion to Christianity entailed the rejection of all visible cultural signs of being a Naga. For instance, Nagas could not grow long hair or wear traditional attire and ornaments. As Furer-Haimendorf had observed, "the old tribal life so enchanting in its gaiety and simplicity despite some streaks of cruelty, has ceased to exist...to be remembered and recorded but never to be observed again" (Haimendorf, 1933: pg.1). Rightly so, some of the practices that were rejected 'never to be observed' included headhunting and painful tattooing for the females as a way to acquire social status. Furer-Haimendorf could not be more astute in his observation for, indeed, the visible contemporary milieu of the Nagas is far from the traditional pre-British and traditional Naga time.

These materials and tangible forms of the Naga society were replaced by espousing westernized and material culture. Therefore, when Christianity was espoused, the local religion of the Naga people was rejected in its entirety. No traces of any element were tolerated. To be a member of the Christian church was to sever all practices and beliefs of the native culture. As a visible sign of being revived, practices emerged that were akin to the religious practices of the former Naga religiosity. Therefore, it can be claimed that the Nagas reshaped Christianity with their own defining ethos. Subsequently, the primal religious worldview and expectations have continued and remained operative, although within the new religion.

Distress then, is not over the loss of the cultural traits that were destructive and discriminatory. The past can be worthy only if it affirms every individual, no matter what gender, tribe or clan. There are those who lament that transition to Christianity has resulted in the loss of the Naga cultural traits and there exists a lost link between the old and the new. However, the need is not so much to turn the clock back but to attempt to recognize that



Naga religio-cultural worldview has continued to bring meaning to the new religion. This is evident by looking at the subordinate position of the women in the contemporary religious institutions in the Ao society. As in the European and Western context where many women are given equal platform and status in the religious institutions, the Naga women and Ao women in particular are still fighting for a place that would treat them equally with men in the religious set up. Therefore, it is believed that Christianity is no longer defined and measured by the Western and European standards, while at the same time life affirming practices and beliefs of the old have been allowed to emerge, continue, transform and operative within the new religion.

Within the above-mentioned context, the study focuses on the continuity of the gendered artefacts of the Ao Naga women through social, cultural, economic and religious context of traditional and contemporary Ao society. Attitudes towards women continue to be influenced by traditional socio-cultural ideas and objects. The men who controlled and continue to control the society maintained traditional attitudes, which viewed women as inferior continue to harbour the same perspective towards women. Many areas and matters are still out of reach for Ao women which continue from ancient times.

Naga traditional society was no different from any other patriarchal society; women had only a secondary role and status in the society. It would be misleading to be convinced by the observations of colonials as well as local writers, who happen to be all males. On the surface level, it appears as though Naga women enjoyed equal role and status and privileges, but on close analysis of the community structure and social practices, it becomes apparent that Naga women were no better than any other women in other parts of the world.

This observation needs to be understood in comparison and in the right perspective. Most would agree that there were restrictions imposed upon Naga women in the traditional society, for their movement or marriage. Women members of the village participated in all the festivals and celebrations along with the male members. They worked together during the day and the men could visit the women in their dormitories. Traditional Naga women could also perform certain household sacrifices in the religious sphere like leading the religious family ceremonies of sacrificing fowls to the deities etc (Longkumer, 2006: pg.53).

Women were initiated as shaman and were successful shamans accepted and popular for their shamanic services. These factors might weigh in favour of the positive observation in comparison with other cultures.

Still, when further query is undertaken, it is obvious that the Naga woman traditionally was no more than a convenient assistant to the man in a family. Naga women could not be counted as a member of the clan since she could not represent the clan in the village council. Naga women could not serve as the village priest, when there were community sacrifices to be performed. Naga women could not possess land neither could they inherit lands. Naga women were not part of the headhunting raids, which brought status to those who brought head, but woman's head was counted as a trophy. All these, except the headhunting that is abolished now, continue to be predominantly existent in the society till date, which shows that no changes have been brought so far in these fields by any external or internal force.

Therefore, traditional Ao Naga women did not enjoy equal status and role in the society, which continues to be so in the modern, Christian society. Naga women and Ao women in particular, with their talents and abilities were accepted and consulted but formally it was and is still rare to see Ao women serve and preside over matters of the community as their male counterpart.

It is not to say that Christianity did not have any positive impact on the status of women in the Ao society. Christianity has proved advantageous to the status of the Ao women who came to profess the religion. They have achieved an upward mobility, having come a long way from the fear-stricken pre-modern individuals to a new freedom in Christianity. However, men are still held back by what is deemed culturally appropriate. So, though women achieved an improved status by becoming Christian, they remain at mid-stage. Also it is crucial to recognize that the origins of the problem lie in the continuance of the socio-cultural attitudes of the people in the society. Constructive measures should be taken by the government both at the state level and the district level, keeping in mind the plight of the women in their society with support from every individual in the society.

Like all cultures, each of the cultures of the Naga tribes is unique. Thus the Ao Nagas have their own traditional ways of singing, dancing, dressing, etc. Traditionally, one could easily tell not only the tribe but even the clan to which an Ao woman belonged by the

way she dressed. After the isolation in which the people had lived was broken following the British intervention and Christianity, many features of the traditional culture were to change. This brought changes to both men and women in Ao society

Under the impact of modernization, Ao women have gradually begun to give up certain aspects of the traditional culture. Except in some villages, for instance, the distinction in dress between different clans has not been maintained. Weddings are increasingly being styled after western forms with the result that the simplicity and solemn way of the traditional marriage customs are lost. Hokishie Sema laments that young boys and girls have almost forgotten their culture and the customs pertaining to their specific tribes. The rich social traditions, which made life so colourful and attractive, are now being completely neglected. In his view, the younger generation of Nagas are becoming alienated, with no roots in the village or culture (Sema, 1986: pg.184-185).

The concern here, however, is the extent to which these changes have affected the status and role of women. The Naga women have been involved in preserving at least the traditional Naga Christian cultural values, if not the pre-Christian values. Women have taken active participation in village developmental programmes of various kinds. In various villages there are women's welfare societies or women's organizations working for village development. Women are entitled to membership on the government-sponsored village development boards in rural areas. Organizations, specifically women based organisations, like the Naga Mother's Association, Watsu Rogo Mungdang, NBCC Women Department, and Women's Department in various Baptist Associations, women's societies at the district, locality and village levels raise their voices against corruption and other evils that have entered the society. While they are committed to the maintenance of high social values, including traditional Naga Christian values, they are at the same time committed to positive changes in situations where the traditional ways discriminate against women.

At the village level the traditional exclusion of women from political involvement in the councils continue as before. Women are still not members of any village council, nor can they take part in the decision making process at that level. Women are denied the right to play a political role in local administrative bodies like the legislative village panchayats and councils, town committees etc. Hence, women are reduced to the status of second-class

citizens, of a lower order than men. This has implications for the roles they are permitted to play in social and religious institutions, as well as in village politics.

At the state level the situation is somewhat different, but the fact remains that male leadership dominates all political parties. When choosing their candidates the parties automatically favour males. One result of this is that, women themselves tend to be apathetic about political matters, not claiming their rights in an organized way. There are various reasons for the limited involvement of women in politics. When examined closely, it is clear that traditional attitudes continue to influence attitudes concerning the involvement of women in politics. Politics is viewed as an area where only men can exercise power, authority and control. The votes of women are valued equally with those of men when men are seeking office. However, when it comes to the selection of candidates, people are still reluctant to select women, let alone elect them. People still find it difficult to permit women to exercise political power. Hence, the male dominated traditions are still kept intact in this context.

There was a huge difference between the male and female in the traditional spaces. The women had no right to land. When we look at the attires, though women were the producers of the costumes, the much coveted ones were all for the men to wear. Tough and prominent symbols were all weaved on men's attire.

With the coming of the British colonials and the American missionaries, much of the traditional beliefs and customs were abolished though not much in favour of the women folk. Modern education too came with these forces and seeped into the society at a rapid pace. Such factors which are all measured to be the trademark of modernization proved futile in erasing traces of traditional holds true for the Ao Nagas especially in terms of their material culture. The idea of equality that modern understandings profess continues to lurk in the corner for the Ao Naga women.

Materials like Tsungkotepsu, the dao waist band, the wooden plate etc are still out of bounds for the women. These differences and exclusion from objects that are esteemed leads to identity creation and speaks volumes and reinforces the "stronger" and "weaker" separation. The strong hold of Ao men in the socio-political, religious and economic facets of the society and above all the continuing customary laws that excludes women from every important decision making process of the functioning of the

system creates larger gaps between the sexes. The men refuse to give equal rights and opportunities to their womenfolk.

### **Conclusion**

The entire debate on whether the Ao society is still under the cloak of gender disparity is pronouncedly avowed by the continuing demarcation of visible valued objects among the sexes. Education, the new religion (Christianity), ingression of globalisation through various channels, the exposure of the youth to other parts of the nation and the world appear to not have affected the Ao society. A valid example for this would be Tsungkotepu and its firm hold by Ao men which are being backed by the traditional mores. To take this point further, it would be appropriate to ponder on the fact that today when male visitors come to Ao areas; they are generally presented with the coveted shawl. This comes to highlight the reality that gender disparity is being reinforced through these displays.

To conclude, it would be acceptable to affirm that with all the varied forces of modernization façade, Aos continue to exclude women, be it material, social, economic or political authority.

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