



The Role and Position of Women in Traditional Ao Society

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Abstract: The present paper, titled “The Role and Position of Women in Traditional Ao Naga Society”, has been undertaken to analyze the position of women within the Ao tribe of Nagaland during the late 19th and early 20th century. Drawing from colonial ethnographic reports as well as other secondary material, the research looks into the various social and cultural practices in traditional Ao society prior to the advent of Christianity. It analyses how various practices, notions and behaviour are shaped by extant gender norms. While much has already been written and published on the women in Western or mainland Indian society, the position of women in marginalized cultures like the Ao Nagas has still not been studied in a detailed manner. Most of the academic work done on the Ao Nagas focus on their customary, political or social life. The position of women continues to remain a topic which has not been explored. The research, as an initial attempt to study the role of gender in Naga society, has attempted to provide an inclusive and encompassing overview of women and their participation in the Ao community.

Index Terms – Women Studies, Ao Naga, Customary Laws, Gender and Social Practices

Introduction

The paper shall attempt to analyze the position of women within the Ao tribe of Nagaland during the late 19th and early 20th century. The paper presents the laws and customs of the Ao Nagas during this period and will focus on how such regulations and practices were mediated by extant gender norms and expectations.

The Aos are one of the most prominent of the Naga tribes of Northeast India. It was also among the earliest Naga tribes to convert to Christianity. The advent of Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th century set into motion radical changes in the society and its administration.

The paper, by analyzing various historical texts including notes from colonial missionaries, ethnographers and anthropologists, will attempt to assess how gender was constructed through social practices and regulations in traditional Ao society. The chapter focuses on various social, cultural and political institutions of the Aos – including the village council system of administration as well as the traditional dormitory system where young boys and girls were initiated to their distinct gender positions and responsibilities. Apart from these, the paper will look into the system of marriage and divorce in traditional Ao society as well as the system of inheritance. The paper, in this manner, draws upon a constructivist understanding of gender identity to demonstrate how social customary practices have shaped the formulation of femininity even in Ao society.

Background of the Study

The Aos are a tribal community living in the Mokokchung district of Nagaland. They have their own myth of origin which has been preserved in their oral tradition. According to the myth, the Aos originated from *Lungterok* (six stones) which is located near Chungliyimti which now lies in the Sangtam area. From there, they had traversed the River Dikhu and migrated to their present location. The Aos practiced strict endogamy. One could intermarry between the different clans but no two individuals from the same clan were allowed to marry. If anyone was found to have done so, they were penalised and excommunicated from the village.

As with other Naga tribes, their village of their residence is of utmost importance for every Ao. Every member of the village ought to respect the decisions of the village and take part in its activities. This village of the Aos is governed by a council known as *Putu Menden*. There are two distinct dialects in Ao language – Chungli and Mongsen. Chungli is considered to be the standard language of the Aos.

The present paper has drawn its preliminary understanding of traditional Ao society using several ethnographic reports and field notes produced by British administrators and scholars in the early 20th century. These include the two seminal texts W C Smith's *The Ao Naga Tribe of Assam* and J P Mills' *The Ao Nagas* which were published during the 1920s. These books give us a clear understanding of the Ao Nagas at the cusp of colonial modernity. They give us valuable insights into the social, cultural, religious and political practices of the people. *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition* by Temsula Ao focuses on the social life of the Aos as well as their cultural, political and religious aspects. It explains the *Putu Menden* system of village administration. The book also contains various folktales and myths that existed within the Ao community. Another important text was the *Aor Temzung Ozung*, the directory of customary laws governing the Aos. The text was collected from the District Court of Mokokchung Dobashi and is book printed in the local Chungli dialect of the Aos. This book lists out the various customary laws which have been traditionally practiced by the Aos and continue to govern and regulate their activities even in the present day.

The Ao Village and Political Organisation

The village was the most important social institution to the Aos. Mills notes, "As with all Nagas the real political unit of the tribe is the village" (qtd. in Venuh 93). The social existence of the Aos centred around the village and the village itself served as the primary unit of governance. All the villagers respected and contributed much towards the village. Tajen Ao asserts that,

An Ao village is a highly organised unit in which every man of the village renders his service for his village. He thinks much of the welfare of his village, takes part in the government of the village, works and helps to run it and fight and defends for it. He contributes and subscribes for the service of his village. (qtd. in Longkumer 24)

The Ao village was governed by customary rules and regulations. As Hocutt notes, for every society, there exists certain rules which bind the people and maintain peace and coordination. Without these binding rules, the society itself would collapse (260-261). These regulations were enforced through the Village Council. The Village Council or the *Putu Menden* was system of village administration and governance which emerged from the birthplace of the Aos itself. There are five governing structures within the Aos in every village. They are *MedemsangerPutu Menden*, *MejensangerPutu Menden*, *MopungsangerPutu Menden*, *KosasangerPutu Menden* and *RionsangerPutu Menden*. These five governing structures of the Aos govern the village in a cyclic process for a period of thirty years each. Due to the presence of this system, here has been no sign of dictatorship or monarchy among the Aos. They had always followed a democratic form of governance, a republican-type government with well-organised Village Councils says Kumar (53).

It is notable that unlike other Naga tribes where the headman was chosen on the basis of age or passed down hereditarily, members of the Ao *Putu Menden* were selected by fellow tribesmen (Hibo 20). While this reveals the democratic ideals and egalitarianism of Ao society, it should be noted that women were never allowed to be part of the *Putu Menden*.

The Dormitory System

Within the village, there were *morungs* which acted as a social institution to the young children. The dormitory or *morung* (in Assamese) was a sacred institution among the Aos where the young children would stay and learn war tactics or the social ways of life. It was a place of the holistic development for youngsters because there were no schools back then. Until the advent of British administration and the Christian missionaries transformed Ao society, the *morung* remained a place for political, social and cultural education.

The *ariju* or *arichu* was the male dormitory. All young male members of the village who had attained the age of adolescence were to become a member of the *ariju*. Here, the boys were divided into *zunga* (age groups) and different work was allocated to them accordingly. The young boys would leave the comfort of their home and sleep at the *ariju* at night with his peers. This social institution functioned as a resting place, as an armoury and as a watch tower to warn the approach of enemies. At a time when headhunting was prevalent, the *ariju* was constructed at the entrance of the village, at a place where they could detect any threats approaching towards their village.

The *morungs* played an important role in providing training for youngsters and imparting knowledge through oral transmission. But more importantly, these were the sites where initiated to and conditioned towards their designated gender roles and men and women within Ao society. In the *ariju*, young boys were provided instructions which focused on shaping normative masculine behavior.

The life in *ariju* is absolutely a kind of military training, full of activities that lead to perfection of man of manhood.... it is a training institution more or less-like a public school. It has a *Tir*, a titular head, and highly structured social system under which everybody keeps engaged as teachers and learners the mater artisans are highly qualified... They are highly expertise personnel in their own fields and the best trainers in their circle.... The busiest period of the *Ariju*, are the festivities, village raids and construction and repairing of *Ariju* and winter months. (Lanunungsangs 79)

The *tsuki* was to the girls what *ariju* was to men. Here, an unmarried woman was to stay and act as the warden to the young girls and educate them. They were taught the basic social etiquettes and the arts of weaving or basket making. Weaving did not only include the simple dresses that they would wear everyday but also included the intricate designs in each clan's attires or those designs that only certain members of the village were allowed to wear depending on their status.

Since these young girls were forbidden to enter the male dorms, the young men would visit the *tsuki* and all acts of courtship took place here. It was prohibited for a female to enter the dorm of the bachelors. It was often considered a bad omen, especially the night before a raid. The reason as to why a girl was restricted to the male dormitory may be because her presence in the male dorms would sway the men off of their concentration the night before the raid. There has been no mention of menstruation being a source of contamination but it cannot be said for certain. But on the other hand, the young boys had no such restrictions for visiting the female dorms. He may come and visit his partner anytime that he wants. The members of the *tsuki* were also taught to chant hymns and songs used in various religious ceremonies.

When we look at the importance of the two dorms, we see that the male dorms imparted education to the boys such as defence tactics or military training used in war time. They were taught with the idea that when they grow up, they would be respectable leaders of their community. The female dormitories simply taught young women how to be good wives, mothers and caregivers. In the village, much importance was given to the *ariju* compared to the

tsukiat at a time when these *morungs* were the only social institution present to educate children. These *morungs* were the first and the only institution where a child may attend and learn the social ways of life.

Marriage and Divorce

The marriage system of the Aos was quite simple. Unlike the Anghs of Konyak and the village chiefs of the Sumis who practised polygamy in the pre-Christian era, the Aos always adhered to a monogamous form of marriage although a widower, widow or divorcee was allowed to remarry after a certain lapse of time (Ao 44). Love marriages and arranged marriages were equally prevalent but endogamy was a taboo.

Though adultery was not common earlier, this changed with time. Smith, in his book *The Ao Naga Tribe of Assam*, records that right after the annexation of the Ao Hills by the British administration a ban was imposed on head hunting. Due to this, the importance of the *morungs* declined and people had more free time. The young men, instead of staying up and being vigilant in the dormitories, had more free time which they spent with women indiscriminately. There was a rise in the syphilis and a downfall in the birth rate of children. Adultery had become so common that there was great importance and urgency to tackle it at that time (182-184).

No one was forced to enter into a marriage with another against his/her will. Divorces were rather simple affairs with the relatives from both parties acting as judges. In the case of constant disagreement and argument among the couple, the person who asked 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 the man 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 had 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 parents' house (*Aor Temzüng Ozüing* 19).

Though divorces were not very common among the Ao community, it would be wrong to say that they were not prevalent. A divorce may take place among two individuals for any possible reason. A person may apply for divorce if found that his/her partner is mentally or physically ill with an incurable diseases. Sometimes, a divorce took place because of physical violence recurring within the family. Another reason for divorce between couples may be impotence on the side of the man or if the woman is unable to bear an heir to him. This was often quoted as a reason because, for the Aos, the primary purpose of marriage between two individuals was to bear children for the future. Conversion of one's religion was also another reason for divorce though this happens quite rarely (Ao 45).

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.

The property rights among Aos are heavily biased in favour of men; only male children are permitted to directly inherit property. Daughters are just entitled to inherit the attires, bracelets and necklaces belonging to their mother.

Writing in the 1920s, Mills thus noted about the inheritance rights of women.

[T]hose (property) bought by her husband are the wife's only for life and go to him or his heirs, those she has bought herself are her absolute property, and she can give them away to her daughter or anyone else she likes, of ornaments she has bought herself any remaining with her at her death go to her father's heirs-her husband has no claim on them, of the beads and ornaments brought with her at her marriage half go to her husband or his heirs, and half to her father's heirs (190).

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 (*mungo*) and not as rightful inheritance (*senmang*). At her death, all her ascribed property could be transferred back to her fathers' 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 rights limits the financial options which women have and make them dependent on men – either 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 parents. The Watsu Mungdang which is the apex women's body located in Mokokchung works for the upliftment and empowerment of women. It has challenged the age-old customary law of inheritance by demanding equal distribution of the parent's property among children, irrespective of their gender. They point out that patrilineal inheritance threatens the security and well-being of women, especially those who are financially dependent on their spouses and parents (Jamir 20).

The Position of Women

Women of the Ao community played an integral part in moulding and shaping the society. They acted as caregivers and the educator to the young kids until they entered the *morungs*. Women were a mainstay of the agricultural labour which sustained these communities. Apart from this, they were also involved in unpaid domestic labour. While women in Ao society had considerably greater visibility, accessibility and security compared to women in parts of the Indian subcontinent, they still did not have much stake within the decision-making process in the public or political arena.

Several writers have pointed out the traditional Naga society was egalitarian and gender-equal. U A Shimray states that, unlike Hindu society which is based on caste and class, such hierarchical distinctions are absent in the Naga societies. He further states that both the genders enjoy equal rights in social, cultural and religious matters (376). But this point of Shimray is to be questioned because an individual's life is always regulated by the political institutions present within a village. The customary laws were put into practice, and transgressions punished, by the village council which did not have a single woman member. Toshimenla Jamir, in her study of the Ao society, noted that the different changes that have been taking place in the Ao society reveal that the tribal societies are largely egalitarian (18). But it has to be noted that it is far from being truly egalitarian. For centuries, as narrated in the fable of *Lungterok*, no woman was ever included in the *Putu Menden* of the Ao society and only men. The Aos are a patriarchal Society. At a glance it may appear as an egalitarian one. However, as Monisha Behal observes,

The impression about women being empowered, particularly in Naga society, is largely a myth. Though much progress has been made in the field of education and employment, especially in the urban areas, yet 'empowerment' in the real sense is debatable because women do not have real decision-making powers within their home, community, over the landed resources, over marriage, over reproductive health and so on. (qtd. in Pisharoty; web)

The women's position in the contemporary Ao society has 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 organizations. The only social institution 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.

However, in present times, the traditional *ariju* and *tsuki* have been replaced by classrooms filled with desks and benches. The oral method of education has also been replaced by text books and notepads. The introduction of formal education provides an opportunity even for the girls to avail equal education. The women interviewed in the following chapters are not just housewives but also working women who manage their family and professional lives at the same time. Their role as women has shifted from simple caretakers and home makers to providers too.

Nevertheless, one deep-lying problem which has continued to be practiced through Ao customary law is that of women's inheritance of property. Until this day, women have no rightful and legal provisions for claiming inheritance. Recently, there have been strong demands from Ao women for greater inheritance rights and safeguards.

The WatsuMungdang is an Ao-Naga socio cultural organization formed with the objective of recreating interest in traditional socio-cultural values and to help women maintain their socio-cultural identity and promote self-reliance... a long standing demand of the organization is for equitable distribution of the parental property among all children irrespective of sex. (Jamir 20)

In India there are no uniform civil laws with regards to the rights of women in matters of family, marriage, child custody and inheritance (Nagendra 55). This problem is even further exacerbated in the case of the Naga tribes. There has been no need to set up any such laws or acts as systems like dowry payment were not practiced. Despite this, there have been instances of domestic violence occurring within the family. Moreover, the laws of inheritance clearly favour the male members of the family. These customary practices which are often discriminatory are justified by convincing women of the minimal role they play outside the household, in shaping and running society and influencing its history. Dolly Kikon says, "Once (woman) has been made to believe that they have little or no role in the history making process of their people... This notion has been 'legitimized' because her worth is associated with the Naga inheritance laws, where a woman has no share, according to the tribal customary law" (qtd. in Parwez 1372). Thus, the women believe that the biased interpretation of the Customary law promote hierarchy, disempowerment and oppressive and is discriminatory for the women (1372).

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to provide an insight into the role and position of women within traditional Ao society during the late 19th and early 20th century. The village was the most important social, cultural and political institution of the people. The village was managed by the Village Council system which is an all-male organisation. With regard to inheritance, women have very little or no right in the society as they are not accorded any right to claim their parents' properties unless it was granted as a gift. In the case of a divorce, the distribution of property between the husband and the wife is not equally shared as women often have to pay a higher price to leave a marriage. The traditional and customary laws that the Aos adhere to and follow are highly commendable for its organic roots in ideals of egalitarianism. But from the perspective of gender, we find that many of these laws privilege men and do not equally protect women and their rights.

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