



Ao Naga Women In Folktales, Maxims And Adages: A Metaphorical And Zoomorphic Formulation.

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Abstract: Folklores and folk songs are the corner stone in the construction of history pertaining to the Ao Nagas. Every practice that allots identity to an Ao Naga emanated from such oral narrations, songs and adages and these elements encapsulated in general, the culture of the Ao Nagas. Thus representing humans through the nature and character of an animal is a common aspect or rather a custom in the Ao Naga society. This paper aims at exploring such folklores and sayings in studying the gendering process and the representation of male and female roles through zoomorphic and metaphorical expressions.

Index Terms- Ao Naga women, folklores, folk songs, culture, representation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Naga population with a literacy rate of 79.55%, with the foundation of education laid down by educators from America, Britain and every part of India, when asked about one's history, the 'why' to a social practice, from birth to death, oral narrations are always the cornerstone. The Nagas with documented history of only its recent past rely a great deal upon verbal narrations in the form of folklores and folk songs passed down through every generation and these narrations have shaped and formed the Naga society of present time. Like most tribal societies, the Ao Naga society is deeply rooted in its cultural practices and customary law. Culture simply stated is 'man-made' and governs every aspect of the society. We see politics, religion, art, architecture and the local economy influenced by this tribal culture and customary practices and law, which in turn plays a great role in allotting identity to a Naga. Nagaland, with an area of 16,579 sq km is the 16th state of the Indian Union and is home to many Naga tribal communities. This paper will focus on one particular tribe of Nagaland, the Ao Nagas.

The Ao Nagas are a tribe among the 17 major tribes of Nagaland, inhabiting Mokokchung district as the administrative headquarter. The Ao Nagas occupy a geographical area of 1615 sq km and is located at 94°17'55" to 94°45'40" E and 26°10'35" to 26°47'21" N. The Aos are a tight knit community and society is

orchestrated by the Ao Naga customary practices and law for anyone with Ao *senso* (citizenship) no matter where they settle. This practice brings a sense of belongingness and allots identity. Identity is what the Ao Nagas hold dear and it comes from different sources, like the germination stages of a seed from sprouting to a plant, the first stage of identity for an Ao Naga is allotted at birth. This identity comes from the clan the father belongs to. The next stage of identity for the child is from the village of the father and as the child matures he or she becomes aware of the identity that comes from the *tsükong* (range) the village belongs to,¹ then the Ao Naga identity is embodied and finally a common Naga identity. All these forms of identity are by virtue from the father's side as the Ao Naga society is patriarchal in nature.

The Ao Nagas have two distinct dialects used for communication among themselves. The *Chungli* dialect, generally for communication in churches and public platforms in Ao gatherings and the other is *Mongsen* dialect. Most of the songs in olden times were in *Mongsen* dialect.

II. SIGNIFICANT FOLKLORES OF THE AO NAGAS

It is said that in the olden days people communicated only in songs and were able to speak to birds and animals. The Ao Nagas, then and now, enjoy a close affinity with their natural surroundings. Naga ancestors saw ones surrounding as sacred. Everything that sustained them had spirits. Forces they could not understand and control were worshipped, for appeasement or reverence. So, the history of many significant events and occurrences are cemented through such stories and songs, from stories of how the world, the hills and plains were created, how the Ao Nagas came to be and why head hunting was practiced and the reason for the celebration of festivals like *Moatsü* and *Tsüngremmong*. Once warring days came to an end with peace and expansion in village settlement, it is only reasonable to wonder and question about matters which they never had the leisure for in the warring days. The answer to such thought process are found in the elaborate and mystical folktales and folk songs we hear of today. For instance, the reason behind the Aos not possessing a written script is elaborated in this tale-

"When the earth was still young, and there was no sharp differentiation between darkness and light, man and beast lived together. During this age, according to the Aos' claim, there was a written script. The script was written on the hide of an animal and was hung on a wall. One day, when the people were away in their fields, a dog dragged it down and ate up. From that time onwards, the people had to commit all knowledge to memory and began transmitting the same by word of mouth to succeeding generations" (Ao, 2019, pp. 8-9).

The Ao Nagas stand firmly on the belief that they originated from 6 stones at *Lungterok*, Chungliyimti village, where 3 males (*Pongener* clan, *Longkumer* clan and *Jamir* clan) and 3 females emerged from the rocks and it is through them the community came into being. It is here that structures for societal functioning were instituted. We see the *Putu Menden*² being instituted for the governance of the Aos. This institution comprises of only the male members of the village and is functional till date. Every important decision regarding the village came from the *Putu Menden*. Other important institutions were the *Morung/Arjü* and *Tsüki*³. The Ao Nagas never allowed any man to partake in any significant affairs of the village or considered him a man if he bypassed growth through *Morung/Arjü* life. *Morung/Arjü* life for the Ao Naga man was identity and acceptance. It was a place of learning where the art of warfare was taught, tactics discussed and also a place where older men would give tasks to the younger ones as a test of courage and strength. These were commands to be obeyed and if failed, he was mocked, ridiculed and punished. Entry of women was prohibited in the *Morung/Arjü*. *Tsükis* too were a place of learning and training for adolescent girls and unmarried women. Here, they were taught the art of being a good wife, skills like sewing, handicrafts and kitchen work. Unlike the *Morung/Arjü*, men visited *Tsükis* to court ladies they were interested for marriage. Other forms of education in the olden days, were through acts like *Nülaksu* and *yim-o-song* (speech delivered holding spear) (Bendangkoka, 2019, p. 11) and singing of songs, narration of myths and folklores where dissemination of knowledge and wisdom to the young generation took place. Through all these we see how oral narrations in the form of folklore and folk songs played important roles in the construction of the Ao Naga history. All aspects of customary practices and law, the rich culture

¹ The Ao villages are geographically grouped into 6 *tsukongs* (ranges) namely Langpanngkong range, Asetkong range, Ongpangkong range, Changkikong/Jangpetkong range, Japukong range and Tsurangkong range.

² *Putu Menden* is the central decision making body constituted by the elders from different clans (male) in the village. Each Ao village is governed by the *Putu Menden* constituted by members from their own village and their jurisdiction is limited to their specific village and members of that village. Their governance is for a period of 30 years.

³ The *Morungs/Arjüs* were dormitory for adolescent boys and unmarried men while *Tsükis* were dormitory for adolescent girls and unmarried women. *Tsüki* was usually in the home of a rich unmarried woman or a rich widow who could afford to house many girls and women. There were several *Tsükis* in a village.

today, came about by the word of mouth. These aspects govern modern life and it cannot be separated as ‘ancient and folktales’ vs. ‘modern and logical’.

III. PORTRAYAL OF AO NAGA WOMEN IN FOLKTALES AND FOLKSONGS

Many superstitious beliefs are unfortunately accepted as normal and carried on through every generation. These beliefs and practices are integral for the existence and functioning of the community. Some practice place women in unfavorable positions today and this point of view is seen in the practice of ancient times, reflected through folktales. It is not uncommon in the Ao folklores to find stories of a greedy and evil stepmother, a cruel sister tormenting her siblings, a conniving wife and the list continue. Humans turning into animals especially at the hands of an abusive woman, humans possessing magical powers and supernatural strength, or supernatural beings and inanimate objects falling in love with humans are frequent occurrence in Ao folklores. Even in such folklores we see stark differences in the roles, characters and duties attributed to men and women. A folklore recorded by Temsula Ao, ‘How a woman became the *kaku* (cuckoo) bird’ shows the difference in nature of a man and a woman. It is the story of a man, named Tsunangpong from Changki village (Ao Naga village). He married a beautiful woman from a foreign village. She was a charming lady who proved to be a good wife, daughter-in-law and mother but with time her beauty seemed to fade and no amount of rest or care seemed to help. It was said that only a secret medicine which was known to her mother could help her. The worried husband took the long journey to the foreign village and got the medicine from his mother-in-law who warned him not to look inside but his curiosity got the best of him and he took a look inside only to be horrified to find a woman’s tattooed hand. He anyway decided to deliver the hand to his wife and secretly watched her. He saw his wife roasting the hand over live coals and relishing every bite. Tsunangpong confided in his father who devised a plan to get rid of her before the villagers got to know, so that her life would not be endangered. Since they could not bring themselves to kill her, Tsunangpong’s father decided to leave her on top of a tall tree in a neighbouring forest without disclosing the location to his son. She was abandoned on that tall tree and is said to have turned into a cuckoo bird in her anguish, crying out *kaku-kaku* (*aku-aku* in Ao dialect translated as father-in-law) as he left her behind. The guilt and despair felt by the father made him reveal the location to his son who missed his wife terribly and longed to have her back. He went to the forest with rice beer looking for his wife only to find the bird still crying out to her father-in-law, *kaku-kaku*. Tsunangpong returned home saying his final goodbye through a song,

*“Ichem kunuk lemlarle de,
Ongo aloyongang sangle de,*

*Ichem kunuklemla tsurabale
Nemera nange ibi jemang”*

(O you were once the darling of my eyes .Today you belong to the wilds of the forests
My darling, if you feel thirsty, drink of this, your favourite drink) (Ao, 2019, p. 116-117)

He returned home soon to die of regret and a broken heart. The superstition tied to this story is that, ‘the taint of cannibalism inherited from this woman finds other expressions in the women belonging to this clan. They say that men who marry them die young, the innuendo being that such women sort of devour their men in this way’ (Ao, 2019). This unfortunate trait is seen as being passed down through a woman, not surprising though that such a norm is accepted in the Ao patriarchal set up.

IV. POSITION OF THE AO NAGA WOMEN

Tajen Ao elaborating on the Ao Naga Woman states, “The daughter when she is married goes out of her father’s family and comes under the authority of the husband. The children of the daughter are the children of a different family of other clan. Therefore the daughter and her children have no place in her father’s family. In the father’s family, the daughters are regarded as subordinate members of the family; they do not become co-owners with sons and do not inherit property of the family. In Ao patriarchal family therefore, woman is in an inferior position than that of the man” (Ao, 1980, p. 63). Tracing back the root to this difference in status and roles of men and women in our society, one can say its origin lay in the practice of headhunting. According to Toli Achumi (2017), “prestige of a person or of the village was known through headhunting”. Women could not participate in headhunting activities because of difference in physical strength and reasons like nursing of infants, responsibilities of cattle rearing, and agriculture, they were deprived of this prestige and in the process left out from decision making process (p. 207). Women are not

given membership access to *Putu Menden*, thus no part in leadership positions in village administration. A woman is expected to be hardworking and equipped with many domestic skills. Men marrying women lacking such skills are looked upon with pity and sorrow. Most domestic affairs, from upliftment of the status of the family to bringing up good children are seen as roles of the wife and mother. It is not considered ladylike for a woman to speak unnecessarily and being vocal about any unjust event or situation, a woman is called a *warak/wajak* (rowdy and loud). Women faced many disadvantages, be it public or personal arena. For instance, a husband was allowed to divorce a barren wife who could not give him a progeny. Ironically, many such men ended up with no heir even with their second and third wives. Women, because they carried the evidence of reproduction on their body, faced being labelled with every unwanted tag in the society and the men got off scot free. “The frailties allowed to men are strictly reprimanded in a woman because she bears the burden of keeping intact the respectability of the tribe” (Saikia, 2017, p. 41).

V. COMPARISON OF MALE AND FEMALE GENDER THROUGH ZOOMORPHIC AND METAPHORICAL EXPRESSION

Reiterating the statement mentioned, the Ao Nagas have a close relationship with nature and it goes hand in hand with everyday life. It is not unusual to find in the vocabulary of locals, comparison of human character with the behaviour of animals, misfits, or characteristics of plants and trees. Analogizing thus, shows a didactic nature with intend to teach morals. Some of such comparisons which are commonly addressed and continuing till the present generation are explained as under:

Auer pangchang (*Auer*= thief, *pang*= mouth, *chang*=talkative/chatter box). A thief in the society is seen as someone with no good qualities, speaks no truth and manipulates people. This quality is used in depicting women who are fond of lying and exaggeration and speaking without much concern for other people.

Ak pang araker marakjem ama (*Ak*=pig, *pang*=mouth, *araker*=tie up, *marakjem ama*= not fully covered). Many Ao Naga households, especially in the villages make a living selling piglets and pigs. As the buyer takes the animal, the long mouth of the piglets and pigs are tied by a rope to ensure that the piglets and pig do not squeal and disturb the neighbours. Sometimes, it so happens that the mouth is not tied well and with the gap left, the piglets and pigs release loud disturbing squeals. This characteristic is likened to a woman who is unable to keep secrets; a gossip monger.

An tachala ama (*An* =Hen, *tachala*=scratching and pecking nature). This nature is compared to that of a woman who picks fights and arguments wherever she goes, like the nature of an aggressive hen who charges at any passerby who means no harm.⁴

Aza aongo memetet (*aza*, *aongo*= social etiquette, *memetet*=oblivious). The Ao Naga society places great importance on social etiquettes like respecting elders, division of roles between men and women and neighborly reciprocity. It is used in describing men and women, but mostly for women who behaves in ways that do not keep up with such social etiquettes.

Jango nuk (*Jango*= basket for measuring rice, *nuk*=eye). In the olden days, small baskets with 4 corners were weaved for measuring rice. Any man or woman who behaved promiscuously or committed adultery was termed as having jango nuk, in lose translation, having eyes for too many people.

Joi pang (*Joi*=conical shaped baskets, *pang*=mouth). *Joi* is a picking contraption used for retrieving fruits like oranges and mangoes from tall trees. It is a conical shaped basket tied to a long stick. This term is used to describe women who bring unnecessary trouble by the way she speaks. It means to say that drama and trouble has been brought near to her by the words released through her mouth, compared to *joi*.

Süngo lang malang (*Süngo*=leafy vegetable, *lang*= bunch, *malang*=not worth). This is a term used to describe the worth of a woman's opinion in certain situations. It can be translated as, not even worth a bunch of leafy vegetable.⁵

In this context, Senka Toshi states that, “Ao women were metaphorically referred to as ‘*süngxolang*’ (bunch of flowers) or ‘*tetsür-tanur*’, (literally, women-children) in their society irrespective of their age, status and qualification” (<https://stjohncollege.in/sites/default/files/pdf/senka%20toshi.pdf>). Dr.Imtirenla Longkumer's work also speaks about how women are compared to a group of leaves, “an analogy for fairer sex and as an identity marker of weakness. Men on the other hand, are compared to tigers, mithun, elephant etc. that signifies strength and valor as is depicted in their cultural attire” (Longkumer, 2018,p.3). Such

⁴ Narrated by Pangerla and Mapula, Mokokchung, Nagaland. They further opined that characterizing women in such a way maybe because men felt intimidated and hence, the depiction to be mindful.

⁵ Narrated by Nukensangla from Kelingmen village, Mokokchung district, Nagaland.

beliefs reinforce gender roles in the Ao Naga society that homes are to be administered by women and outside of homes to be left in the hands of men.

VI. CONCLUSION

It should not be misconstrued that Ao Naga women have no rights and honour in the society. There are many folktales that speak of powerful women, wise wife, the undying love of a mother, and many songs sung by men swayed by the beauty of women. Compositions of songs for women are not only a thing of the past. Recently, a song was composed and sung in honour of a woman. The song is recorded below:

Oh hoi (2) hai (2)
Ku mera nungshi yimkong (ku soyim)
Tsungrem sabang pa nukrangdong asungdang yimkong
Tiareri renemtsuba (tesem)
Sungtsungpen watsu wabong wangshia prangshir
Tashir tawar jenti (adoktak)
Lensanir medangdangi adoktakjangni.

Oh hoi (2) hai(2)
69 buba (AKM)
Rujusanger longzung nungshi ong-i-rogoni
Watsu Opangnenla (laza sangbang)
Imtisangla, Bendangwabang, Rongsensashi
Par akum kupok nung (nungshilong)
Iba longzuk lirepba tsuka sayatsuogoni.
Oh hoi(2)hai(2)⁶

(My lovely place of birth, God's own chosen village.
 Look at all His wonderful creations, such honorable and wise men and women.
 We prayerfully ask for more of such leaders for the world.
 We commemorate the 69th AKM with a memorial stone.
 Opangnenla and her children have graced this event and we inaugurate this memorial stone peacefully; with her family.)

The act of composing and singing this song can be interpreted as a way of honoring and acknowledging her contributions to the society. A practice of great honor from the past, immortalizing people and acts, even in the present time holds great value. Another way of honor and recognition shown is through the act of naming places, institutions, roads and buildings in a person's memory. One such instance is seen in the story of how Sangtemla ward in Mokokchung has been named after a woman. It is said that 'Sangtemla and her sister, Katangla were sorceresses. They would compete with each other by making their dogs and bulls fight against each other. On one such occasion, Sangtemla's animals lost and her bull fled into the jungle. She went searching for her bull and found him deep inside the forest near a pond. The bull refused to go back to the village, so she settled there, naming it 'Sangtemla Kimung'. The pond is presently located between the Circuit House and DC's residence in Mokokchung' (<https://alongkao.wordpress.com/2011/03/15/25/>). Other stories like the instance of finding the plant for the dye/ink of tattooing, an art Aos' are famously known for is attributed to two women, Sangshidangla and Arongdangla. Longkum village saved from its enemy village, Nokrang because of the wisdom of Akangnungla, a wise woman are records of women's achievements⁷. Ao woman/ Ao girl child is able to inherit husband's/father's self-acquired property (not ancestral land) if a will in her favour is left behind, are positive instances in the society. A form of protection practiced by Ao men today is refraining from slaughtering animals at home and outside of home by the husband when the wife is pregnant. It is believed that such an act causes disfigurement or scars to the baby during gestation period. There are many subtle acts of love and protection, passed down from our ancestors that are still in practice. It is true that the status of men and women in the Ao Naga society are

⁶ This song was composed by Toshinenla Longkümtsür, Akhoya village in Mokokchung district. This song was sung in the celebratory function held on 5th January, 2024, commemorating the occasion and memory of 69th AKM, Ao Students' Conference held in Akhoya Village from 18th January to 20th January, 2023. Mrs. Opangnenla, a renowned woman from Akhoya village was invited as the chief guest for the function held on 5th January, 2024. The song mentions her and her offspring with honour.

⁷ This information is from Aotsur Jenmung, a publication of Watsü Mungdang(2018, p.58). Watsü Mungdang is the frontal organisation for Ao women and is constituted by members from every Ao village. Once an Ao girl reaches the age of 18, she becomes a member of Watsü Mungdang by default. This body is a socio-cultural set up that works towards the upliftment of women folk in the society.

unequal but it cannot be justified that women are discriminated at every level. Many instances show how women too were treated with honour and admiration in the past and present.

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