

## **Taboos of the Ao-Nagas: Change and Continuity**

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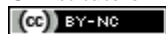
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The Ao-Naga is also one of the many tribes from Nagaland, North-east of India. The Ao-Naga tribe itself is not homogenous and is divided into six major clans, followed by many sub-clans. The following clans such as *Pongen*, *Longkumer* and *Jamir*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

Like any other tribals in India, the Nagas have no written records; they sustained and endured on oral traditions that were passed down by word of mouth through generations. They differ from the rest of the other Indians in origin, languages and appearance, customs and practices including their way of life. The AOs constructed their distinctiveness in their cosmology and even their life patterns and constructed their identity in their oral traditions.

The word taboo is explained as *anembong*<sup>1</sup>, *nokdang* and *memela* by Rentyh Keitjar in Ao Dictionary (1999, 161). But again for the Nagas, the term *genna* is also used as taboo, prohibition, restriction or forbidden. According to A.W.Davis, the word *genna* is used in two ways: (1) it may mean practically a holiday, i.e., a man will say my village is doing *genna* today, by which he means that, owing either to the occurrence of a village festival or some such unusual occurrence as an earthquake, eclipse, or burning of a village within sight of his own, his village people are observing a holiday; (2) *genna* means anything forbidden (Verrier Elwin, 1969, 514).

The main objectives of this article are twofold, one to reconstruct a general picture of the taboos practiced by the Ao-Nagas in the past, examine the context of the taboos, and secondly to explain, the change in the practice of taboos over a period of time especially with the impact of Christianity and education.

### 1. Definition of taboo:

Taboo can be defined as the prohibition of a behaviour, thing, person, etc. based on cultural or social norms. It can also be defined as a strong prohibition relating to any area of human activity or social custom that is sacred and forbidden. The society is fully against the breaking of the taboo because it is usually considered objectionable or abhorrent. According to Henry Presler, taboo or taboos are those “*caution established to guard against supernaturally dangerous things like plants, person especially those possess mana*” (1971, 10).

Taboo word is not a new word in a society but it is a party of human behaviour that represents meanings. As Raja T. Nasir (1978) said that language is a part of human behaviour and it is acquired a habit of systematic vocal activities that represent meanings. Every language has its own taboo words with the different forms, functions and meanings. Generally, taboo words are offensive and cannot be considered appropriate in any occasions. In many places, ironically, there are still a lot of people using taboo words in a conversation or in a communication.

### 2. History of the word taboo:

The common etymology traces taboo to the Tongan word *tapu* or the Fijian word *tabu* refers to forbidden behaviour; it is forbidden because it is behaviour believed to be dangerous to certain individuals or to the society as a whole. Captain Cook borrowed the word *taboo* in 1769, from the Polynesian<sup>2</sup> language spoken in the Hawaiian Islands. A report of his voyage was published in 1884 but the word appeared earlier in Europe in the narratives of expeditions by Adam J. von Krusenstern, 1802, and by Otto von Kotzebue, 1817. In his report, Cook explains that some Chiefs of *Tonga* were not allowed to behave like the common people, they were *taboo*.<sup>3</sup> A large number and variety of prohibitions to the word *taboo* were reported. Cook further specified that *taboo* was applied to anything forbidden to the touch. In his account of his 1777 visit, Cook wrote: “Not one of them would sit down, or eat a bit of anything.... On expressing my surprise at this, they were all taboo, as they said; which word has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden.... When anything is forbidden to be eat, or made use of, they say, that it is *taboo*.”<sup>4</sup> The concept of taboo soon became part of the English language. The term is of Polynesian origin and was first noted by Capt. James Cook during his 1771 visit to Tonga, but taboos have

been there in practically all cultures. Although taboos are often associated with the Polynesian cultures of the South Pacific, they have proved to be present in virtually all societies past and present.

Researchers such as James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, 1890) compiled the comprehensive documentation of cultural beliefs and practices around the world and Marvin Harris proposed explanations of taboos as a consequence of the ecologic and economic conditions of their societies. Even Sigmund Freud (*Totem and Taboo*, 1913) provided an analysis of taboo behaviors, highlighting strong unconscious motivations driving such prohibitions. In this system, described in his collections of essays *Totem and Taboo*, Freud postulated a link between forbidden behaviors and the sanctification of objects to certain kinship groups. Freud also stated that the only two "universal" taboos are that of incest and patricide, which formed the eventual basis of modern society.

**3. Classification**

In the broader sense, different classes of taboo may be distinguished as where three classes are those of taboo proper:<sup>5</sup>

- (i) Natural or direct, the result of mana (mysterious power) inherent in a person or thing;
- (ii.) Communicated or indirect, equally the result of *mana*, but
  - (a) acquired or (b) imposed by a priest, chief or other person;
  - (iii.) Intermediate, where both factors are present, as in the appropriation of a wife to her husband.

**4. How to identify and avoid taboos:**

Some taboo activities or customs are prohibited under law and transgressions may lead to severe penalties. Breaking of other taboos may have social implications, such as embarrassment, shame, and rudeness. A taboo can be identified through the function, action, and the result. Taboo may include prohibitions on eating certain foods, marrying certain clan, fishing or hunting at certain seasons, interacting with members of other social classes, coming into contact with corpses, women not allowed to talk during village council meeting, men folk prohibited to touch women’s weaving implements and so on. The observation of such taboo is significant for the maintenance of social order. To avoid taboo, one should know that every culture has different cultural practices and has their own version. For every culture of the world, taboos are classified accordingly because all the society have different practices and beliefs systems, food habits, language, rituals, marriage system and so on. There are taboos in every subject and they vary from culture to culture. What unites these different ideas is the quest for the knowledge of right and wrong. This mission links people of all ideologies in an attempt to better themselves and create a morally just human race.

**5. Taboos of the Ao-Naga:**

To study about the taboos of the Ao-Naga, it is important firstly to understand their ancient religion because to break a taboo was unimaginable. Indeed, Ao society was entrenched by taboos that they could not conceive within them a piece of land without the presence of a god (Panger Imchen, 1993, 73). Religion is an important part in the life of the Ao people. According to Panger Imchen, “*An Ao cannot conceive of a world apart from religion. The whole universe is sacred and filled with gods...Religion possesses ideas and values that are the guiding principles of one’s behaviour*” (1993, 73). The religious beliefs and practices of the Ao-Naga are well-established and organized. The Ao respect and fear their gods (*tsungrem*) and seek blessings, protection, security and well-being.

Mills describes the Ao-Naga religion as ‘not a moral code...[but]... a system of ceremonies... [to appease]... the deities around him who... are every ready to blight his crops and bring illness upon him and his’ (1926, 214). The Aos like any other Naga tribes believed in the existence of several gods and spirits, both benevolent and malevolent which have different names given at different times and occasions according to the actions and manifestations. It is also believed by the Aos that the causes of troubles and suffering which befall in a person’s life or family and the inhabitation are attributed to the action of the evil spirits. So they performed a system of ceremonies by offering sacrifices to keep these deities and spirits appeased.

Sl.No	Gods	Position
1.	<i>Lijaba</i> (believed in one supreme god)	Creator of the earth and everything within, also sustainer and controller of this earth.
2.	<i>Longtitsüngba</i> , also called <i>Aningtsüngba</i>	( <i>Aning</i> - heaven; <i>Tsüngba</i> - Chief or Lord)
3.	<i>Lata-zuni Tsungrem</i> (moon-sun)	who holds the heavenly elements and all natural forces connected

	god)	with the solar system.
4.	<i>Meyutsing</i>	lord of justice and he is also considered to be a god of truth.

**Table 1.1. Different gods of the Ao-Naga** (Panger Imchen, 1993, 34)

People were tabooed to talk ill about these gods and they have to offer sacrifices like chicken and eggs every now and then for blessings, protection and so on. Altar or religious platforms were taboo for children and women. It was believed that to break this would result in a death in the family. For the Ao-Naga, every new undertaking must be continued and followed by superstitious observations. The breaking of a taboo is felt definitely result in some calamity. Every religious ceremony, communal and household, was governed by a taboo. Hunting, fishing, traveling was so controlled.

**I. Taboos during festivals:**

The major festivals of the Aos are *Tsiingremong* and *Moatsü*.

Sl.no	Name of the festival	Description
1.	<i>Tsiingremong</i>	Pre-harvest ceremony which is observed for three days. It is the highest and the last public ceremony. It is also known as <i>asemnü mong</i> , a festival of three days. Prior to the start of the festival, the village will announce the Village Gate ( <i>Süngkü</i> ) to be closed and was free entry or exit is restricted and regulated for people who do not belong to that particular village.
2.	<i>Moatsü</i>	Celebrated in the spring season when the villagers have finished with seed sowing. They pray for blessings upon new grains in the field and also protection of crops throughout the season. <i>Moa</i> , is an open field or street, and <i>tsü</i> , to go round; meaning to go round the open streets with singing, drinking and dancing.

**Table 1.2. Important Festivals of Ao-Naga** (Panger Imchen, 1993, 52)

During *Tsiingremong* and *Moatsü* festivals, it was taboo for husband and wife to have intercourse, no one may leave the village and rice may not be husked; men and boys spin tops, and women and girls play games with sword-bean seeds are stopped from playing (J.P.Mills, 1926, 220). *Anempong* (*genna*) was observed strictly from intercourse, travel, no guests were allowed and no hard works etc.

**II. Taboos during feast of merit celebration:**

In the past, the feast was hosted by an individual for the entire community in declaration of being a rich man in the village. The feast was considered the highest social status and had the deepest expression of religious sacrifice. During this period especially the owner does not receive anything from others, also, the other way round, including fire thong, tobacco and drink. The mithun<sup>6</sup> meat and the pig or hen is taboo to the owner of the feast. Both husband and wife were taboo from having intercourse during this time.

**III. Taboos during pregnancy and child birth:**

- a. **Food:** For pregnant woman, foods were cautiously consumed and she was abstains from all food forbidden to her. If she finds a tasty beetle in the fields she may not bring it up for supper tucked into her skirt at the waist, or her child will be born with a birth-mark; she must bring it tied in a corner of her cloth so that it does not touch her (J.P.Mills, 1926, 263).
- b. **Role of husband:** Husband (even he) was not allowed to kill any animals like snake,<sup>7</sup> tiger, even pig or chicken, otherwise it was believed that the child will look like them. This kind of practices is still followed though there are some changes in the present time.
- c. **Guests:** It was tabooed not to entertained guests for five or six days when a household is under kimho during child birth. Even villagers and best friends were not allowed because some evil spirit might come and touched the child or bad winds (*mopung tamajung*) will enter the house and the child and the mother will get sick or die. The reasons are, the weakness in their health will make them difficult to bear the breath of the outsiders by their strength.
- d. **Intercourse:** Even sexual intercourse<sup>8</sup> between the wife and the husband during this period was highly restricted.

**IV. Taboos during tattooing (teptsü atep):**

In the past, a girl was compulsory to undergo tattooing. It also took place to show the sign of marriageable age. Tattooing was very significant because tattooing gives one's identity in the Ao society. Only if tattooing was done the girl will be identified by the society as to whose clan and group she belongs. Tattooing was fairly common among the Naga tribes. The women tattooed on the face, breast, arms, neck and legs. The tattooing required five years time for completion. The pattern varied slightly from group to group.

Parts of the body	Designs
Chin	four vertical lines
Breast bone	a chin of lozenges from the throat to the bottom of the breast bone
Shoulders and Stomach	inverted V's on the front of the shoulders and stomach
Wrists	lozenges and sides squares on the wrists
Leg	lozenges on the lower part of the leg
Knee	a sign of arrow pattern on the knee

**Table 1.3. Tattoos of the Ao-Naga women (J.P.Mills, 1926, 30).**

This tattooing<sup>9</sup> was done by the old women of the village in the jungle near the village. It was strictly forbidden in many villages for any male to be present. Till the sores were healed she was not allowed to eat anything she wants but only rice, bamboo pickle and birds.

According to tradition, it is believed that tattooing was done because of the superstitious beliefs that those without tattoo were taken away by tiger, tattooing even distinguishes from the slaves because slaves were exempted from tattooing, and those who did not tattooed were in disgrace and could not expect to marry well.

**V. Taboos on clothes and ornaments:**

Sl. no	Types of clothes and ornaments	Description	Taboos
1.	<i>Tsungkoteptü</i>	This is a decorative warrior shawls. One of the most characteristic clothes of the Aos. This is a status symbol shawl. This shawl is the most popular shawl of the Ao male. By tradition all the male members cannot wear this shawl. In the past, the rich man and warrior were entitled to wear this shawl. It has rich cultural meanings. This shawl is a striped cloth of red and black and is composed of three pieces, joint together as a complete shawl. There are fine big red stripes followed by the small red striped on one segment. Another same piece of cloth with fine thin black stripes was made which is about five inches in width on which different figures of Mithun symbolizing wealth of the owner, elephant and tiger to symbolize valour of the men, human head representing the success in head-hunting and a few other things like spear, dao and cock are shown.	It was tabooed for ordinary men to wear this shawl then punishment was given otherwise it was believed that he will die because of breaking the custom (Mills, 1926, 37). Even women were tabooed to wear this shawl. At the present time, women still have no right to wear this shawl.
2.	Decorative shirt, crystals earrings, brass rings, hornbill feathers, brass bracelets	Women's attire were depended on her father and her husband, so whose father had done <i>Mithun</i> sacrifice wears a different pattern on her skirt and besides clothing their crystals earrings, brass rings, hornbill feathers, brass bracelets clearly indicates that they belong to the rich and wealthy family. They displayed their attire during festivals.	Poor and ordinary women were not entitled or tabooed to wear such ceremonial clothes even during festivals.

**Table 1.4. Clothes and Ornaments**

**VI. Taboos on colouring of clothes:**

The Nagas in general and the Aos in particular are very fond of colours. Their clothes are incredibly colourful and beautiful. The Nagas are fond of using variety of coloured clothes and dress. The Nagas used dark, blue, red and rarely yellow dye. The whole process of dye were carried out by women, there is also a taboo among some tribes to handle any dye during pregnancy lest the foetus be effected by the colour (J.P.Mills, 1926, 92). The indigenous red dye was used less than the dark blue. The red colour denoting of blood, it was believed that young women using this colour in dye operation (superstitiously) would die a violent death or lose her head in a raid. Therefore, only old women dye yarn in the red colour.

The indigenous handloom called '*Tekalilemtsü*' is used to weave their clothes. . Mills writes, the Ao loom was a tension loom of the simple Indonesian type which was even found among the Semas and Lothas. The Ao women keeps the necessary strain by sitting with a belt which is often made of low skin '*aphi*' in the back attached to a bar '*anen*' from which the warp '*kutong*' runs to the beam '*mungmung*' is firmly attached to the wall of the house. The heddle is called '*Angetlong*' and the shuttle is called '*Süksen*' which is shot through by the hand, and the woof '*lenten*' beaten up with the sword '*alem*' which is rubbed either with wax or with a very fine white powder, where Mills thought it to be like French chalk found on the underside by the leaves of a species of wild plantation. It was tabooed for a men to use this implement to weave or should not even let the *alem* touched them. It is still observed even in contemporary time.

**VII. Taboos on marriage (kibalempu):**

In the Ao-Naga society, the system of marriage is exogamous upon which the framework of Ao society was built. It is taboo for the Aos to get married to the same clan. For examples, Longchar man cannot marry a Longchar woman or Longkumer man cannot marry a Longkumer woman but inter-clan marriage is possible, that is different clan among the Ao people. Through this, relationship and understanding is promoted through the clans. This practice is still continued till today.

An Ao man can have only one wife at a time as the custom imposes monogamy on the Aos. The aim is to prevent immorality in married life. After marriage, if adultery is practiced severe pig-fines or his house was raged by the relatives of his wife.

The father is the head and authority in the family and the family expands along the lines of male persons and form a clan. The clan members have common property, traditions and status and inherit each other.

The Nagas have cultural differences and is caused by different environmental factors like air, water, location, surroundings, soil, places etc. According to its geographical location a tribe is identified first at the regional level and then only its inner social-structure known. The people's idea of religion in the past, worshipping of different gods is mainly due to geo-environment influences. If we see the way of worship, different practices and rituals, superstitious beliefs, food habits, attires, implements, religion, socio-economic, festivals, culture and traditional practices, folklore etc are connected as they depended very much on nature. In every walk of life there were taboos. In this article, it is perceived that taboos were regarded very important because observing of taboo helps the individual as well the public to stay away from danger, to be pure, to be more alert and so on.

Taboo was observed for every works, activities that come their way because to break a taboo was unimaginable. Religion or belief system was very important for the Ao-Naga. The Aos believes that the causes of troubles and suffering which befall in a person's life or family and the inhabitation are attributed to the action of the evil spirits. So they performed a system of ceremonies by offering sacrifices to keep these deities and spirits appeased. The breaking of a taboo is felt definitely result in some calamity so it is seen that wherever taboo is to be avoided is done carefully. Purity was maintained by the people in a very strict way.

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Genna in Ao language is called *anembong* but its meaning is also used for prohibition, restriction, purification and forbidden.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter II. Taboo and the Ambivalence of Emotions; <http://www.bartleby.com/281/2.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://science.jrank.org/pages/8139/Untouchability-Taboos.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taboo>

<sup>5</sup> Taboo: <http://www.theodora.com/encyclopedia/t/taboo.html>

<sup>6</sup> Mithun (*Bos frontalis*), the domesticated free-range bovine species, is an important component of the livestock production system of North-Eastern hilly region of India. This unique bovine species is believed to be domesticated more than 8000 years ago. Mithun is primarily reared as meat animal and highly preferred among the tribal people of North-Eastern region of India. Mithun is also used as a ceremonial animal and plays important role in economical, social and cultural life of the tribal people of North-East. Besides, it is now established that superior quality milk and hide can be obtained from mithun. <http://www.nrcmithun.res.in/>

<sup>7</sup> J.P.Mills mentioned that if a pregnant kills a snake her child will have a tremendous tongue (1926, 263).

<sup>8</sup> J.P.Mills mentioned that both wife and husband should refrain from sexual intercourse when the mother is expecting child from two or months ahead otherwise the child in the womb will feel shame and die (1926, 264).

<sup>9</sup> The knowledge of the art was hereditary in the female line, where her mother teaches her daughters, who in turn teach to their daughters. With the coming of British and Christianity wearing of brass rings, crystal earrings stopped slowly and gradually tattooing became insignificant.