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Glimpse of Ao Nagas' Beliefs and Practices: An Outlook of the Traditional Mode of Defensive Tactics in Pre-colonial India

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**Үндістандағы нагалық
Ао тайпасының наным-сенімі мен соғыс
тәжірибесіндегі дәстүрлі
қорғаныс тактикасына
деген көзқарас (отаршылдыққа
дейінгі кезең)**

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**Взгляд народа Ао из племени
Нагана на верование
и практику традиционного
метода оборонительной
тактики в Индии (период
до колонизации Индии)**

The Aos are a major tribe of the Nagaland state located in the North-eastern part of India. Belief in the existence of the Supreme Being is common to most of the tribal people. Therefore, for the Ao Nagas religion become a part of their life and is interwoven in their social life, economic activities, and in their beliefs and rituals. The practice of headhunting was closely connected with these beliefs. Most people misunderstood «head-hunting» as mere chopping off a head. However, for the Ao Nagas, head-hunting was one of the main necessary defense mechanisms and regulation of the life in a sovereign setting. Headhunting was also associated with masculinity and survival itself as well as a vital source for fertility of crops and women. However, one should keep in mind that the practice is the thing of the past. After the advent of British, they introduced Christianity and the practice of headhunting was abolished.

Key words: the Aos, «headhunting», Naga tribes, conquest, traditional values, tribal society.

Берілген мақалада ағылшын отарлауына дейінгі Үндістандағы нагалық Ао тайпасының наным-сенімі мен соғыс тәжірибесіндегі дәстүрлі қорғаныс тактикасына деген көзқарас қарастырылған. Ао халқы Үндістанның солтүстік-шығыс бөлігінде орналасқан Нагаланд штатындағы ірі тайпалардың бірі. Құдіретті бір тылсым күшті мойындап, құдайлық болмысқа сену – тайпалық құрылымда өмір сүрген халықтардың көпшілігіне ортақ ұғым. Нагалық Аолар үшін де дін – саяси және әлеуметтік өмірдің бір бөлігі болды. Жалпы алғанда, көпшілік «бас алу» ұғымын дұрыс түсіне бермейді. Алайда, Аолар үшін «бас алу» күштілері әлсіздерді бағындыруға ұмтылған шапқыншылық жағдайындағы өмір салтымен, басқа тайпалардың жаугершілік саясатына төтеп беретін негізгі қорғаныс әдісі ретінде тәуелсіз тіршілік етумен тығыз байланысты болды. Сондай-ақ, Аолар «бас алу» үрдісін батырлық, ерлік, жердің құнарлығын артырып, бақ-дәулет пен ұрпақтарының өсіп-өнуіне апаратын жол деп түсінді. Десек те, бұл дәстүрдің өткен күн еншісінде қалғанын ескеру керек. Ағылшындар отарлау саясатының барасында Нага тайпаларына жаппай христиан дінін мойындатқаннан кейін, мұндай тәжірибені жүзеге асыру заңсыз деп табылып, тиым салынғаны белгілі.

Түйін сөздер: Ао халқы, «бас алу», Нага тайпалары, шапқыншылық, дәстүрлі құндылықтар, тайпалық қоғам.

Данная статья посвящена верованиям и практике традиционного метода оборонительной тактики племени Ао до завоевания Индии Англией. Народ Ао является одним из крупных племен, обитающих в индийском штате Нагаланд, расположенный на северо-востоке страны. Вера в Высшую силу является общим для большинства племен. Таким образом, и для народности Ао религия была той частью их жизни, которая соприкасалась с их общественной, экономической деятельностью. Большинство людей понимают «охоту за головами» просто как отрубание голов. Тем не менее, для Ао понятие «охота за головами» было одним из главных необходимых механизмов самозащиты и регулирования жизни в племенном обществе. «Охота за головами» была связана с понятием мужественности и самовывживания, а также как важный источник для их верования в плодородность земли и детородность женщин. Однако, следует отметить, что эта практика осталась в далеком прошлом. После колонизации Индии Англией, племена Нага были обращены в христианство, и впоследствии данная практика была упразднена.

Ключевые слова: народность Ао, «охота за головами», завоевание, племена Нага, традиционные ценности, племенное общество.

**GLIMPSE OF AO NAGAS'
BELIEFS AND PRACTICES:
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TRADITIONAL MODE OF
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PRE-COLONIAL INDIA**

Headhunting and its historical implications

Every traditional society attempts to explain, predict and control its environment through religion. Nagas are no exception to this phenomenon. The patterns of beliefs of the early Nagas appear to be animistic. Hemmed in both sides by the massive mountain ranges of the hills and by the very walls of the typical village, most Naga groups developed religious systems that were very locality-specific, that is, highly elaborated with respect to the immediate, localized microcosm in which villagers lived [1, p.4].

«Headhunters» is the term often used to describe the Aos by the people living in the plains. The earliest mention of the Nagas made in the Buranjis (the Chronicles of the Ahoms dating back to 1228 A.D.), the history of the Ahom kings of the thirteenth century mentions little about the Nagas, but whatever written on Nagas says, that they are warlike people living in the north of Assam, inhabiting the inaccessible hills where people are savage, village warring with villages constantly cutting off heads to get skulls. Mythical explanation of the origin of headhunting:

«At the beginning of the earth, there was only one tree. Animals and bird ate the fruits bore by the tree. One day a fruit fell from the mouth of a bird. A lizard ate the fruit, which fell down on the ground. When the birds asked the lizard what had happened to the fruit, the lizard replied the red-ant had eaten, however the red-ant denied it. There took a fight between the red-ant and the lizard. The lizard head was served by the red-ants. They danced with joy and shout. Human being saw the battle» [2, p.1] and that from that day onwards man imitated the practice of head hunting.

Another mythic explanation that attributes to Naga headhunting is that during war and raids the villagers who stayed back in the village anxiously wanted to know the outcome of war and raid, but those who went to war did not bring anything except the news of victory and defeat. In order to prove their success, the warrior thought that they must bring some parts of enemy's body to prove their achievement. They started bringing home the victims' heads and people believed their heroes' war stories. Thus, it was linked to headhunting.

Headhunting is although not justified in the age of the civilized world. However, an insight view of the Ao Nagas would highlight

the readers to visualize the dynamism and cultural values attached to the practice of headhunting. For most people misunderstood «headhunting» as mere chopping off a head. However, for the Ao Nagas as well as for that matter the Nagas in general, headhunting was one of the main necessary mechanisms for 'defense', 'offence' and regulation of life in a sovereign setting just like the modern warfare [3, p.15].

Headhunting epitomized construction of political power in the first place, as all the villages until the mid-nineteenth century were independent and sovereign with no common authority to bring them under one political unit. Headhunting was a way of demonstrating the superiority of a village that could respond appropriately to challenge of its authority [3, p.16]. Until the mid-nineteenth century, a village would often boast of having collected more skulls on the head tree than the other village showing its superior political power. The Nagas preserve the heads as memorial trophies. Even today, one can find some human skulls preserved in some Naga villages. Mrs. Clark who served among the Aos gives us an account of how an Ao village called Merangkong credited with an impressive skull house earned the reputation of a warrior village:

Those who followed us in the early days of our work in the Naga Hills may recall merangkong as the first village after our own, Moulng, to receive a Christian teacher. It was a large village, much given to war, as the Nagas expressed it, holds as wars as there was hairs on a man's head, in which took pride; and the decoration of the village skull house testified to its triumphs [4, p.406].

The Ao Naga patriotism and heroism was created out of their head hunting practices. The *Ariju* (a male dormitory) provided and maintained the military discipline. General security of a village largely depended on professional headhunters. Indeed, it was seen as a mechanism of survival itself.

An Ao village was organized as autonomous political units with no higher authority to regulate their peaceful relation. Though each village was free to run its own affairs there was no guarantee that it would not be attacked. Random slaughter of unknown people was neither understood nor appreciated. There had to be good enough reason to raid and take heads. There are also rules, code and ethics for headhunting. This logic was respected in most situations. There were several ways to settled disputes, before any war broke out the contending villages tried their best to solve their common problem, without causing bloodshed, they did it

through «*Aolidanger*» emissary or in other words peace maker, failing which they resorted to war [5, p.158]. Most of the time the messenger is sent with a message coded in riddle system. The battle between the Merangkong, a big village belonging to Ao tribe and the combined forces of nine villages belonging to konyak tribe was followed with the same customary code of war. As T. Penzu writes;

«A package or parcel wrapped in wild leaves was sent by the nine Konyak villages forces to Merangkong. The parcel contained the following materials: cut pieces of thatch and palm leaves, charcoal and red chilli. The parcel was bound by nine numbers of flat and thin, rope-like bamboo split pieces of about 2 feet in length. It was as the ancient Greek mythical Sphinx riddles... pieces of thatch and palm leaves meant villagers' houses, charcoal meant fire, which was interpreted that the enemy will set fire to the village and burnt the houses. Red-hot chilli denoted heartache, heartburn by trouble, and nine; bamboo split pieces represented the 9 villages to bind merangkong» [2, p.73].

The village receiving such coded message was usually giving one of the three replies as follows; (1) to surrender and give annual or one-time tribute to the message sender, (2) to desert the village, taking shelter somewhere to fight another day at an opportunity time, or (3) to fight battle or face-to face fighting [2, p.73]. Pitched battles took place occasionally when two villages would meet arrangement at a certain spot. In a pitched battle, the warriors would turn up in their ceremonial attire. The head count was low in this formal pitched battle. Killing was done openly and straightforward; giving information to the victim's village by the victor. It was 'must' for the victor to declare the identity of the victim. That means the name, father's name, clan and village of the deceased person must be known by the killer, before cutting off his or her head, and the news must be sent or made known to the victim's village that he had killed a person with that identity. This war conduct was followed for the reason to make known the killers identity to the victims' family members and villagers so that they could take revenge. This was a conventional customs to disclose and make known the identity of both the killers and the killed. Thus, there was practice of head hunting for revenge of earlier killing. To avenge the loss of a very dear one until the enemy's head was won.

The Aos also practiced guerrilla warfare attack. Troops on punitive expedition raided isolated parties working in the field or ambushed paths along which people were likely to pass. The raiders sat

behind a thin screen of jungle purposely left uncut with spears ready to strike. At times, the raiding party attacked the village at night by first setting the village on fire. As the village under attack was usually taken by surprise, the warring parties mostly resorted to guerrilla warfare tactics until either side was forced to submission. Such forms of attack took place when the loser in the previous feud failed to pay war indemnity to the victorious village.

Headhunting and fertility

Within the Ao perception, the head hunting was linked to power and fertility. Warfare, and particularly head taking were indeed central to the fertility complex. The Aos believed that accumulation of the head would ultimately strengthen the soul force of the village and distinctly by offering sacrifice; they would please their God, Lijaba [6, p.71]. The headhunting is really life-hunting, it takes the form of headhunting because the soul resides particularly in the head and it's easier to carry back the head than the whole corpse [7, p.227]. For the Aos headhunting was a means to tap the power of the supernatural forces. According to J.P Mills «under the tree (*Mangkoterong*) the 'Tir' (commander of the warriors) plucked a chicken alive with the declaration that the heads taken were only a retribution for the sins of the other village and a prayer for more heads, bumper crops and general prosperity in the future. The chicken throat was finally cut with the bamboo knife and the omens from it entrails.» [7, p.204].

Heads were especially sought at certain times, for example at the time of constructing new houses (Ariju), during diseases epidemics or when harvest were poor. The Aos believed in the validity of these religious rituals and saw a direct connection between their prosperity and the headhunting.

Headhunting for increasing «Aren»

There was no limitation in taking a head of humans. Almost any head would do, men, women, children of any age, although there were certain restrictions, for instance on the killing of such as «idiots», hunchbacks and deaf mutes. The heads of young women were considered more valuable for several reasons. According to Maj.Gen. Sir James Johnstone, to kill a baby or woman was accounted a greater feat than killing a man, as it implied having penetrated to the innermost recesses of an enemy's country [8, p.30]. Secondly, another reason was probably the desire to reduce the enemy population by killing their woman folk and, lastly, for the want of women's hair which was used as a valuable ornaments. The headhunting was indeed a risky and dangerous practice as the head hunter not only takes

the head of the victim killed but more seriously his soul in his hand.

The head was counted as the most valuable part of the body because of the ideas concerning a 'multiple soul' [9, pp.21-34]. The Aos believed that *aren* (soul force) was the self-sufficient unit that made the crops flourish and lead to general prosperity. The *aren* was believed to be located in the human head, and since it was believed to be the essence of fertility to the human population. The only way to increase the supply of *aren* to the village way was by obtaining the head and thus the soul of an outsider. The soul was regarded as a 'fertilizer' and the 'multiple soul' helps in increasing prosperity of the village and individual and ensuring continuation and enhancement of life and fertility. We do find a parallel case of connection between headhunting of the enemy or the dead and the harvest in the north – west of *Kafiristan* among the *Munda* tribe. The tribe here followed the ritual of cutting off the head of their own dead to save them from enemy and showering grains of wheat on returning headhunters. This practice thus suggests a similar pattern of belief of the *Munda* tribe with the Ao Nagas, a close association of captures soul with the fertility of the crop.

Many rituals and customs were observed after a successful headhunting raid. It was custom for the warrior to remove the brain from the heads and washed it in a river outside the village. The Sema Naga tribe would gladly eat at least a morsel of food with unclean hands before entering his village. This was apparently meant to transfer the soul-substance of the slain to the slayer, as well as the food produced from his clan's crops and to the communal fields [10, p.128]. The Ao warriors' wives would specially pronounce a ritual to appease the head; she would feed the skulls, saying: «I am feeding you. Bring your father and mother, and your sons and daughters.» [10, p.128]. This was done so the soul encourages it to call on its relatives to be killed. The skulls were then hanged on the tree called the *Mangkoterong* [11, p.40] («*madar*»- an *erythrina tree*) and once the flesh decayed it was placed in row in the Ariju or over the log drum (*sungkong*).

Warriors' higher status by headhunting

Apart from obtaining the head for *aren*, the Aos also practice headhunting for various motives. The achievement in bringing a head to the village was directly linked to getting higher status and had the privilege to wear gorgeous clothes and ornaments, which was envied by all. Ornaments and textiles recorded a man's position in society, and that of his wife and daughter [11, p.40]. These insignia

were highly desirable because of the achievement necessary to gain the right to wear the sacred clothes and ornaments. *Mangko tep su*, or *talep tatsunger su*, or *Nokinketer su*, a red and black striped shawl with drawings of cocks, tiger, lion, mithuns, elephant, hornbill, sun moon, japilee (ancient Naga currency), dao, spear skull etc.) was entitled to be worn only by a person who has taken head. The headwear called '*Demku*' made of bearskin along with six hornbill feathers, called '*Ozumi*', affixed to the *demku* was also meant to be worn by headhunters. Similarly various ornaments decorated with beautiful materials such as the *Sukhuyu* (a cloth decorated with goat's hair dyed in red color with sprinkling of undyed white goat's hair), *Sukhupong* (basket decorated with fringes of long hair), *Kepdang* (breast plate), *Shepu* or *Sapha* (neckwear made of tusk of wild boar), *Khangserie* (brass earring) [12, pp.211-213], this foresaid attires were solely meant to be worn only by the warriors.

For the Aos one other motive behind headhunting was nothing more than to earn himself a wife. It is true that the Ao Naga men under the general objection on the part of the girls to marry only with the man who has taken a head. The idea behind this conception was based on the belief that unless a man has brought a soul-matter, i.e., a head from outside, a man was less likely to be fertile and beget stout sons than a successful warrior would be [13, p.403]. Young maidens instigated their betrothed to this bloody work, and it was the women's voice that thrilled the cry of victory when these prizes reeking in blood were brought into the villages [14, p.72]. Men were called boys, women, or even cows, until they had contributed to the village skull-house or Ariju. It was difficult for a headless young man to win affair maiden unless he brought home a coveted prize [6, pp.71-72].

Apart from the belief theory of fertility of the crops as the gift of dead ancestors and practice of headhunting, the Aos Naga was obvious that the souls of the heads he takes serve him in the next world [13, p.406]. The Aos believed in life after death and so, when a warrior dies and goes to the «Land of the Dead» [7, p.226], on the road the warrior meets the men he has slain. The victim will then carry the load of the killer and accompany him to the «Land of the dead».

In order to see the insight of this cultural shape why the Aos practiced headhunting is to look through the various attachments of cultural and religious

forms, through which the Ao men represented their lives to themselves and to the community. These cultural forms encompassed the distinctive ways in which their conduct was culturally mediated, patterned, institutionally grounded and historically produced. Taking head demonstrated their potency and increase fertility of the land – a tangible proof of their valour once they arrived home from war. It was indeed a benchmark of having arrived in life and a sure means of securing all that a man holds close to his heart – respect, pride, honor and woman. Therefore the Youngman's impulse to raid and take heads was firmly rooted within the complicities of taking heads, which entailed the greatest honor for man, it defined masculinity.

However, with the appearance of the Colonials and the American Baptist missionaries around 1874, the headhunting was suppressed among the whole Naga tribes by British authorities. The British government declared headhunting illegal and people found practicing were either fined and those who in the judgment of the British committed serious crime were exiled to British prison in Andaman and Nicobar Island. A positive impact was that there was peace and order among various tribes and villages. No doubt, the act of headhunting itself is not justified in civilized World however; the social and cultural stigma that is adhered to the practice indeed had various social values for the people. For the Aos the practice of headhunting was also directly linked to the ladder of climbing a higher status in the society, at the same time it also entitled a man to wear a scared ornaments and textiles. By imposing such a restriction often a Nagas complained that without headhunting their ornaments would die out [15, pp.132-135].

Nonetheless, the elimination of the headhunting also marked an upward growth of population. Elimination of war and partly with advance medical facilities, the death rate of the people is considerably curbed. Thus, we see in the nearly seven decades (1881-1947) of British rule in Naga Hills, the population of the Nagas increased. In 1881, it was 95,950 by 1951, it has increased to 205,950 [16, p.138]. We can see that since the time when Aos, after the introduction of British administration, have ceased to indulge in warfare. The once believed in the concrete elements of social, cultural and religious practices and the rigidity to uphold, has become nothing more than a symbol today.

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