

TSÜNGREMONG: **SABBATH OF THE AO NAGAS**

TEMSUIENLA CHANGKIRI
Research Scholar
Department of Psychology
University of Delhi
Delhi

Abstract

The first solemn day documented in the Old Testament is on the seventh day of creation. Christianity has merged so gracefully with the ancestral way of life among the Ao Nagas that the pre-Christian harvest festival of the tribe— *Tsüngremong* —is envisioned as the Sabbath. The mythical legacy of Lichaba, ancestral god of the Ao Nagas, is celebrated in Christian spirit with a hope that he continues to bless the people with plenteous crops and cattle. The paper presents Christian and symbolic interpretations of the myth of the origin of *Tsüngremong*.

Sabbath in Heaven:

In Ginzberg's (1937) "Legend of the Jews" he recounts the inception of Sabbath in Heaven. God, before the creation of the world, had no one to praise Him. Therefore, the angels and the holy hayyot were created along with the Heavens and their host and Adam as well. God had worked on his creation for six days and on the seventh day He completed his work and rested. This day he declared as the Sabbath for it was a day on which it was suitable for Him to be praised. On this day, all of heaven and earth and every creation broke out in songs and celebration for His splendor and grandeur as He ascended to His throne. All of creation broke into songs and adoration for their creator as God sat upon His Throne of Joy. He had gathered all angels that represented every aspect of His creation, chief angels from every heavenly hosts and angels of each heaven and its creations, angels both good and bad.

All of the angels present before God extolled him in dance and songs with different instruments as they rejoiced in praise of His grandeur and power and magnificence and of all that He has created. On this day in Arabot, the seventh heaven, Sabbath was observed in honor and adoration of His glory with greatest of jubilation. Then God made the Angel of Sabbath sit upon a Throne of Glory and demanded he be exalted by the chiefs of angels of all the heavens as He bid them to rejoice and dance as they sang praises of the Angel of Sabbath and the all of heavens chimed in with praises of God and Sabbath in His honor. On this day of veneration God had permitted even Adam to be ascended unto the highest of heaven and be partake in this joyful celebration of Sabbath. All of His creation, including Adam, on this day was dedicated as God bestowed the joy of Sabbath upon all beings. Adam upon seeing the great majesty of the Sabbath, sang a song of praise to the Sabbath day unto which God called him out for his fault of not intoning songs of praises to Him, the God of Sabbath Himself. Thence, the Sabbath rose and gave thanks unto the Creator as did the whole of creation. Such was the manner in which the first Sabbath in heaven was celebrated. On this day, God declared to the angels that He had chosen the people of Israel as His people who in the same way would sanctify this day and observe the Sabbath and keep it hallowed from all work in a similar way.

The Sabbath for Adam had yet another significance for when he was "cast out" of paradise before the end of Sabbath without staying overnight, he was called out. The Sabbath came to his defense yet again by pleading God for mercy upon Adam and to keep the Sabbath sanctified and blessed as it was without any creatures being slain. This was how Adam was spared by God and saved from the fires of hell as punishment for his sins. As a display of gratitude Adam composed a "psalm" in honor of the Sabbath which was later embodied by David. For Adam this was not the only chance given to him to really appreciate and once again learn the value of the Sabbath. God out of consideration for the Sabbath, even after his first sin, allowed Adam to keep hold of the celestial light that permitted him to behold every corner of the world. God let this light shine till the end of the Sabbath day after which the light ceased. Perturbed and faced with the fear of being attacked by the snake while in the dark, Adam was still shown mercy as God enlightened him and learned to produce light by rubbing two stones together when in need. This celestial light was only one of the seven gifts that Adam had enjoyed before his fall which was taken away by God and promised to be granted again only after the coming of the Messiah. The other gifts are "the resplendence of his countenance; life eternal; his tall stature; the fruits of the soil; the

fruits of the tree; and the luminaries of the sky, the sun and moon, for in the world to come, the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold.”(Ginzberg, 1937)

Sabbath of the Aos:

The Aos are a sub-tribe of the greater tribe of the Nagas hailing from the Naga hills in the Northeastern part of India. Integrated into the Indian state during her colonial era, the Nagas are a group of people whose origin still lies to be wholly distinguished and whose tribal identity is a distinction in the already existing plethora of Indian diversity.

Tsüngremong is observed in the first week of August before the first harvest. It is regarded as the most important and last major festival of the Ao Nagas. In these three days of worship and sacrifice, a strict Sabbath is observed wherein the people honour Lijaba the creator for a bountiful harvest and crop. Lijaba being the godhead is sanctimoniously worshipped so as the people and everything on earth is blessed and is provided with good health and protection from any misfortune or calamity for the rest of the year. Pious care is taken in the observance of this three day Sabbath with utmost salutation and respect so as not to cross or dissatisfy him as it may result in calamities and tragedies that may destroy crops and epidemics that claim lives.

The festival is also sometimes called as “Longsamong” as according to another account. The village of Longsa was the first to celebrate the festival as it was from there that the blooming of the “Songsaben” flowers were first spotted below Chungliyimti village which heralded the start of the festival. It talks about two men Merangshang and Tsungremshang, the latter who reaped more bountiful harvest despite the same effort by Merangshang. When told that the plenteous harvest comes as a blessing for giving due worship and sacrifice to the god of providence, the others followed suit.

Proceedings of *Tsüngremong*:

The beginning of *Tsüngremong* is marked by the family priest going into the jungle and bringing back “Jangpetwa” which are nettle leaves, to be used for the sacrificial rituals and also to be stuck at the doorpost outside of every house in the village before the start of the Sabbath. This use of nettle leaves has been found in both Slavic and Native American cultures as a sacred herb used in shamanic practices for purification and defence against evil. During these three days of observance, all residents of the village are to remain within the village gates. No visitors are also allowed in. Any forms of manual work were to be prohibited including that of the slaves. In the Bible, God forbids working on the day of Sabbath (Exodus 20:10). One is not allowed to speak loudly or to spit or stamp on the ground. Water could be fetched from the wells within the village but were supposed to be carried on the shoulders and not on their head. In these three days of Sabbath, all of the offerings made to Lijaba have to be new; freshly brewed wine and food cooked over a newly made fireplace. These offerings are in lieu of starting afresh, a yearning for renewal. On the first day, a pig is sacrificed and pieces of it are given to each house at the end of every main street in the village. This is an offering to Lijaba who in this way is bound to come across it no matter which direction he enters from. The motif of pig sacrifice is prevalent in Ao culture and evidently observed in both the ancient Greeks and Egyptians. Pig sacrifices have been made during harvest to Persephone and to Osiris as representing the killing of the corn-spirit (Frazer, 1996, Pg.564, 571). Similarly, the ancient Hittites sacrificed pigs to warrant a good harvest and fertility for the crops and for the wellbeing of the humans (Collins, 2006). The significance of pigs extends to much more than that because a lot of the Mediterranean cultures believe pigs to find their place in a unique position as pigs were considered as a substitute for humans.

The second day, in front of the house of the oldest man of every sector of the village, a sacrificial pig is killed. This meat has to be cooked in a certain way, roasted over a fireplace which has to be newly made. This meat is distributed only to the children of every household and in case of a childless family it would go to the wife. The second day is the only day when a little bit of ceremonious festivities are observed although still under strict *genna*. There are communal feasts, dancing, singing and tug-of-war. These are regular practices that remain a conspicuous part of any significant ceremony for the Aos. They are done auspiciously in both the sowing festival and harvest festival. Harvest festivals are a unifying factor for communities and indulging in communal activities reinforce this. The acts of dancing and participation in the tug-of-war games can be considered as a form of veneration for the gods and for fertility of the land. Such instances have been found in prominent Asian cultures such as that of the Japanese, the Korean and the Burmese for whom tug-of-war promotes fertility (Frazer, 1996).

The third and final day is considered the most important day of worship. The family priest would assist the family in offering Lijaba sacrifices with a cock, eggs, newly brewed wine, rice, chilli and ginger. After this, a

special pig, the biggest one, selected by the village witch-doctor, is to be sacrificed at the village altar by the priest along with a cock. The cock's entrails are to be inspected for omens foretelling the future of the entire village. The pig's entrails are also cooked and consumed by the priests. No women or children are allowed to be a part of this according to the customs. These rituals are practised strictly as it is feared that any mistakes or deviations would bring about Lijaba's wrath.

After the ceremonies, as the priests return from the altar, every house opens their doors and throws out the bottoms of their broken earthen pots and chant:

"Hang polang temang

Neli khiogo

Nang dang ja-angma

Teri la moa yang"

"Here we are offering

Everything to you

Even the bottom of the pots.

Eat this and in return

Give us your blessing."(Ao, 2014,Pg.63)

Following this final act of ceremony, every household shut their door before dusk and stayed quietly sharing a meal. Lijaba is expected to appear and walk through the village appreciating these offerings and enter every house blessing them. In case any house is left unmarked by the "Jangpetwa" is said to be unfortunate as Lijaba's anger will befall upon them and they will be marked by bad harvest, misfortune, and calamity. This measured act of marking their houses safe had been instructed to the Israelites living in Egypt for the Passover, who had to mark their houses with the blood of the lamb on the night God struck down the first born of all humans and animals in Egypt (Exodus 12).

The Myth of Lijaba and the two sisters:

(Imchen, 1993)

While at Chungliyimti, once Lijaba, the creator, appeared in the city one cold evening disguised when all villagers had returned home from work. He appeared in the form of an old man, poor, unwanted, with sores from head to toe. He visited every house, from one end of the village to the other asking a night's shelter. He stood at a door and asked "can I stay in your house tonight?, the man would reply, "Oh no, I have a dog to bite you". He would then go to the next door and ask, "Could there be any space in your home for me tonight?". The man on seeing the sores-stricken stranger would reply, "oh no, we have a new baby cow so we are under a religious genna, kimho". The Lijaba would turn to another door for shelter but a similar reply would be given. Having being refused at all doors, finally Lijaba come to a house where two orphan sisters lived, Yarla and Noksangmenla. They had no extra room, space, food or clothes. They had nothing to offer but accepted the old unwanted poor man. As they had nothing to cook, Lijaba picked up a paddy grain from his head and a piece of flesh from the bottom of his foot which they were instructed to cook. It multiplied and so they had a great feast that evening.

The next morning, before Lijaba left the village, he blessed the orphans' home with plenty of crops and cattle, which they received but to those who had refused him shelter he cursed with poor harvest despite their hard labour that year. The story says the villagers regretted what they had done to the lord of creation when they saw the prosperity of the two sisters.

Archetypal amplification of the Myth of Lijaba and the Two sisters (Hypothetical interpretation)

Symbolic:

The Creator Lijaba visits his people when they are at home but the people have no heart to receive him and he wanders in the village to find "home" in the life of his procreators. Lijaba appears in the village in the cold evening and the events in the myth are forecasted during the darkness of the night. Evening signifies the death of the day and provides the transition to night. It is this transitional time, which observes the death of one phase and leads to the birth of the next. Evening divides but is also the conjoining interval between day and night. Lijaba arrived when all the villagers had returned from work. This is the time when man prepares to retire for a

night of rest and rejuvenation. Day represents the conscious life of the man and night brings with it its unconscious manifestation.

Lijaba presents himself as a person in need. Yet, he does not find charity and generosity among his people because they are self and family centred. People are religiously oriented as in the case of the one family under the *gemma* which is socially significant to them but far from the spiritual need to accept God. As Carl Jung writes, "Mankind is constantly inclined to forget that what was once good does not remain good eternally. He goes along the old ways that once were good, long after they have become injurious to him" (Jacobi, 1953). Religiosity without spirituality can serve no purpose. Each person and family has a valid reason to be personally and socially preoccupied leaving no room for God in one's life and for the welfare of the family. As the myth unfolds Lijaba, after being rejected by all, comes to the house of the two twin sisters.

Concerning the sisters, two hypothetical interpretations can be proposed. The two orphaned sisters are a summation of all the people Lijaba visited in order to be at home in their lives. The heart of the people is cold, especially towards the end of the day. No one counts the blessings and people are poor and orphaned eventually. The myth proceeds with Lijaba seeking shelter for the night. Turned away from every house in the village, Lijaba seeks shelter in the house of the two orphaned sisters, Yarla and Noksangmenla. The image of the orphaned sisters carries that of the discarded and the sacred. They are found embedded in the themes of absence, rejection and exposure to the world without any primary foundation or protection. To be orphaned is to be separated from one's original roots. The orphans also portray a psychological identity indicating the evolution of the within towards more independent and perceived wholeness. In fact, primal loss and vulnerability of the orphans are a given, alongside a greater manifestation of the potential for growth, self-sufficiency and self-containment is found. It is the naïve childlike openness of the orphaned sisters that led them to embrace the unorthodox agencies of help in the form of the helpless and dejected old man.

Lijaba picks a grain of paddy rice from his head to be cooked. The head in the landscape of the body forms the fertile grounds of consciousness. It is the seat of wisdom, soul and power. The head of the corn according to Plato is "the image of the world". In the east, the rice shares the symbolism of the corn. It is an essential food and is of divine origin. Like manna, it is said to provide supernatural nourishment and is a symbol of abundance and divine provision. Among other things, rice represents spiritual nourishment and it is this rice that Lijaba shares with the two poor orphaned sisters. The grain from his head is like the seed for future regeneration. The act of taking the seed from the head is a symbol of life force which has regenerative powers, as in the myth Lijaba is imparting a symbol of spiritual awareness to the Aos.

Lijaba then proceeds to pick a piece of flesh from his feet. Feet and spirituality has always been a divine union. Feet symbolises humility, which is intrinsic to the embodiment of spirituality in a person. Religious and spiritual traditions and beliefs around the world believe in a connection between body and soul. This connection is embodied in the sole of the feet. Buddha's feet have been worshipped as a symbol of the spiritual path that he took to attain enlightenment. Feet roots, connect us to the earth and ground us to reality. It is emblematic of one's natural being and suggests the sequenced movement of one along a spiritual path.

The sisters are instructed to cook the food which then multiplies enough for them to feast upon. Cooking enacts what has been given and provided and transforms it into something greater, transcending the initial matter. God's faculty to enlighten man is limitless. In an act of miracle, Jesus has unveiled this truth as in what is known as "feeding the multitudes", he provides nourishment to the masses through blessings and sacrament. This act of Christ was in anticipation to the Eucharist, which in corollary is in anticipation for the messianic banquet in heaven.

Lijaba's act of picking a paddy grain from his head and flesh from his feet and sharing it for consumption is a variation of the Christian Eucharist. Wherein, the flesh and blood of the Lord is consumed. The letters of Apostle Paul and Acts of apostles in the new testament demonstrate that the belief of early Christians in the institution of Eucharist as a mandate to continue the celebration as a hope in this life of the joys of the banquet that is to come in the kingdom of God, which is an experience that awaits for the man who has become whole in his spirituality. It is a sacrament, the promise of communion between man and God. Sir James Frazer (Frazer, 1996), documents similar practices such as that of the Mexicans, who believed to enter into a mystic communion with their deity by this consumption, which for them was receiving a part of his divine substance.

The myth unfolds in Chungliyimti, which for the Ao-Nagas hold great precedence and sacrament. It is the land from where the first Aos emerged from the stones and where the very structure of Ao society was laid down. Land is intimately interwoven with spirituality and one experiences the holistic and integrated part of one's

identity and belonging. The significance of naming has been a tradition indelible and of great cultural substance for the Aos. So much importance is attached to a name and its meaning (Mills, 2003, Pg. 226). A name carries and is emboldened by the deeds and legacies of the forefathers. The two orphans in the myth carry such names. *Noksangmenla* means “to be settled at the place where the enemy has been defeated”. Land has been a significant part of the cultural history and individual identity of an Ao Naga. Land defines an Ao. In the same sacred land where the Aos emerged from, Lijaba, their god of creation is turned away. Temsula Ao(Ao,2014,Pg.43) states that, “the gradual de-culturalisation of the tribals which began in the late nineteenth century in the North-East have eroded the people’s image of themselves as a group with a valid culture which has constantly been described as savage and primitive.” *Yarla*, the second sister, also means “to dance”. Dance has been an expression of spirituality since time immemorial. Among several other purposes the most important is to honour the supernatural power (Oesterly, 1923). To dance is to connect with the heavens and the earth, the spirit and the people.

As the residents of Chungliyimti turned away their God, in their practised religiosity, the two sisters welcomed him in. They embody the very essences of their names which allude to the providence provided by land and god. Towards the end of the day, nobody remembers God. Gratitude is lost and people forget to count their blessings. In hallowed lands, the indigent orphaned sisters reflect the failure of the Ao’s to the land and to god. After the dawn of the new day, the destitute orphans have been blessed by divinity beyond their means. The onset of a new day brings about the birth of a new consciousness and a renewal.

Religious:

The coming of Christianity to the Ao-Nagas was marked by the coming of American missionary Dr. E.W. Clark set camp at Molungyimsen in the year 1876. Before him an Assamese preacher Godhula Babu, in 1872 was first sent on an excursion mission to the then unchartered territories of the Ao Nagas. Since then, there has been an upheaval of the old animistic religious practices of the Aos as they started to embrace the gospel. This has been earmarked as an important stamp on the evolution of the Ao Naga society and the arrival of modernity. Panger Imchen(Imchen,1993) has highlighted this synthesis of the animistic beliefs of the Aos to that of Christianity .The Aos have been said to welcome and accept the new religion into their midst with very little resistance as they have made quite a seamless transition. This may attest to the fact that there was no binding need to break down and restructure an already prevalent system. The concept of a monotheistic religion with an already Omnipotent creator God wasn’t an alien, radical concept. The concepts of Heaven, Hell and judgement after death were in line with the already existing beliefs.

In the myth above, we can see the underlying message of humility, humanity and acceptance, a shared value that is preached in the gospels and is expected of every believer. Lijaba comes in the form of a man, a poor man of the humble and lowly. John wrote, “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us”(John 1:14) which was echoed by Paul, “Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of humanity”(Philippians 2:6,7). One of the cardinal features of Christianity was about how Jesus, the Son of God, came to live among humans as one, to ultimately deliver them from their sins. The myth weaves the same narrative of welcoming and accepting the almighty coming in the form of man no matter how he presents himself as “receiving man is to receive God the invisible”. The myth also signifies the falsities and undoing of blind and practised religiosity without a firm awareness of one’s spirituality and true dedication to god. The people of Chungliyimti miss out on being blessed by Lijaba himself because they were too caught up in their rituals to please him. One should be humble in faith and strong in belief, and not only a believer on the exterior. A true Christian believer exercises the wealth of their wisdom and embraces everyone without any judgement.

Conclusion:

“If you treat the Sabbath as sacred and do not pursue your own interests on that day; if you value my holy day and honour it by travelling, working, or talking idly on that day,¹⁴ then you will find the joy that comes from serving me. I will make you honoured all over the world, and you will enjoy the land I gave to your ancestor, Jacob. I, the LORD, have spoken” (Isaiah 58:13-14)

God sanctified the Sabbath for all to observe. All of His creations are to be bound by the ordinance that was laid down at the dawn of creation. Sabbath is observed so that we may give our due gratitude to God and the blessings that have been bestowed upon us. Thus, *Tsingremong* is a time for the Aos to remember and sanctify what Lijaba has created and given them.

Harvest festivals all over the world have the same converging theme. They are observed in gratitude to the gods and their providence. A time of blessing and bounty, it brings together all elements of humanity. Mircea Eliade (1959) significantly talks about the importance of festivals that pertain to Sacred Time. Festivals are a way for us to return to what is the “eternal mythical present”. Sacred time is not bound by the confines of time and we can re-enter into the cosmic time of creation and the origin of the world by the rites and rituals re-enacted so as to achieve a renewed state of being. When one partakes in a festival or such sacred observance, one participates in the transcendent sacred time in which the tapestry of man’s religion, society and all other aspects of existence were woven in. In this way, man’s way of life, his identity, and perhaps even his destiny are strengthened when he participates in a festival commemorating a sacred time. The Ao festival of *Tsiingremong* is a return to this sacred time that ruled the lives of our forefathers prior to the structured, profane time of today. *Tsiingremong* during the days of animism had been observed under strict *genna*, for the upcoming harvest. Temsula Ao(2014) remarks that today has been “designated as a ‘festival’ rather than a religious occasion”. *Tsiingremong* as celebrated now is not only a harvest festival but also a mark of unity and celebration of our culture and heritage that harkens back to the era that has been. However, what remains is the spirit and regard with which we pay homage to the Creator.

References:

- Ao, Temsula. (2014). *On Being a Naga*, Dimapur, Heritage Publishing House.
- Brown, Raymond Edward, Joseph A. Filzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy. (2013) *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Bangalore. Theological Publication India.
- Collins, B. (2006). Pigs at the Gate: Hittite Pig Sacrifice in its Eastern Mediterranean Context, *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*, 6(1), 155-188
- Cooper, J.C, (2017), *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, London, Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Inc.
- Frazer, James, (1996), *The Golden Bough*, London, Penguin Books Ltd.
- Imchen, Panger, (1993), *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, New Delhu, Har-Anand Publications.
- Jacobi, J. (Ed.) (1953). *Psychological Reflections, An anthology of the Writings of C.G.Jung*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Mills, J.P, (1973), *The Ao Nagas*, Bombay, Oxford University Press.
- Oesterley, W.O. E, (1923). *The Sacred Dance: A Study in Comparative Folklore*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ginzberg, L. (1937). *The Legend of the Jews, Vol I, Bible times and Characters from the Creation to Jacob*. Philadelphia. The Jewish Publication Society of America.