

**Imtimangyang**

## **TRIBAL MEMORY: A STUDY OF THE AO NAGA GENEALOGIES**

### **Understanding genealogy**

Genealogical study has earned an increasingly prominent position in the ethnographic studies ever since River's 'The Genealogical Method of Anthropological Inquiry' (1910) whereby the method has become a regular kit in the ethnographic toolbox. The word genealogy is derived from two Greek words, *genea* meaning generation and *logos* meaning knowledge. Typically concerned with the study of family origin and histories, however in the case of ethnographic studies it is not merely limited to kinship terms and who is related to whom; rather it lays the path for deeper understanding of the underlying social organization and the way they function. Understanding complicated social relationships will require, at first, understanding the position of an individual in relation with other individuals in the society, the picture of which will become clearer by obtaining genealogical information. Genealogy is one component that comprises the package of oral tradition and for a society that relies solely on oral tradition for the conservation and transmission of customs, tradition, values and belief, it becomes the, sometimes the only, means of asserting one's status, position and most importantly identity.

The purpose of genealogical study will determine the course it takes as to whether one is concerned solely with inheritance of property or keep sake of family history which should be sufficed by family genealogy of recent past, or to come up with an anthropological insight concerning social organization of a particular community for which understanding the kinship system becomes imperative, therefore necessitating deeper genealogical probe which will in certain community lead to tracing of a genealogy right up to the origin of man legitimizing rights, inheritance and ownership along the way. However, the study of genealogy does not come free of problem, instead a challenging one, not that of constrain to both the informant and the researcher but the information itself come as a difficult task which requires to be meticulously decoded. The task is not that of collecting one but that of

disentangling the historical facts from the myth which have, in the course of time, influenced by varied social condition, accumulated mythological and supernatural elements as an integral part of its narration.

Distortion of genealogical facts is hardly absent especially on the one that is orally transmitted from generation to generation. What is to be remembered and transmitted is largely dependent on the historical usefulness of the individual and the events of the past having contemporary relevance and the social organization of the given time, yet *forgetfulness* or *carelessness* on the part of the individual narrating the genealogy which might result in a distortion of historical facts, as Rivers stated, cannot be entirely ruled out. In a tradition where its conservation and transmission is entirely committed to memory over hundreds of years passing through numerous individuals, a distortion however insignificant it may be at a given point of time is certain to get compounded as it travels from one generation to the next. The point is distortion can be innocent and not always bent under constraints of societal organization and that the accounts can be historically accurate to a great extent and not just '...idiom or charter for current political relationship' as Bohannan remarked of the Tiv genealogy (in Irvine 1978).

### **People and tradition**

In this paper I will discuss the genealogy of Ao Naga<sup>1</sup> tribe, a tribe found in the state of Nagaland situated in the north-eastern region of India presenting the case of *Ozukum* clan of the tribe. Efforts will be made to address the point made in the preceding paragraph as well as how deep a role genealogy plays in the social organization and function of the Ao Naga community.

Ao people belong to Mongoloid ethnicity of Tibeto-Burmese linguistic group constituting one of the major tribe in Nagaland with a population of approximately 250,000 people inhabiting the Mokokchung district, the district headquarter, covering an area of 1,615 km<sup>2</sup> and bounded by Assam state to its north, Wokha district to its west, Tuensang district to its east and Zunheboto district to its south. The research was conducted, as a part of my PhD research work, in a village called *Molungkimong*, 113 miles from the district headquarter, also celebrated as the first village where Christianity was embraced in Nagaland in 1872. The data have been collected through primary as well as secondary sources. Interview was conducted with several individuals who provided me the information most graciously.

Ao tribe comprises of two moieties namely *Chungli* and *Mongsen*. The most distinguishable feature of these two groups is their language which is unintelligible to each other. Numerous differences can also be seen in their customary practices, dress and tattoo. Yet these differences hardly act as a barrier between these two groups which rather emerged as a bigger unit sharing the same identity and territory for centuries, intermarrying their sons

and daughters, knitted social organization bounded under the same law of the land, establishing village after village, enjoying privileges in equal term, side by side in battles. It is interesting to see how such groups with unintelligible linguistic barriers managed to firmly bond and forge a social relationship, but even more intriguing is the way of maintaining their purity and separateness from one another mostly pronounced in the customary practice of running two parallel political headship system each adhering to their unique customary norms, therefore it is normal to see two *ong* (chief) in a Ao village, one that of *Chungli* and the other *Mongsen*.

The origin myth of Ao people is principally situated at a place called *Chungliyimti* located not very far from Mokokchung where it is believed that first man emerged from *longtrok*<sup>2</sup> meaning six stone (*long*=stone, rock or boulder, *trok*=six) and established the village called *Chungliyimti*. *Tongpok*, *Longpok* and *Longchakrep* are said to be the three patriarchs that emerged from *longtrok*, the progenitor of the Ao people to which all the clans of Ao tribe can trace their descent to one of the three patriarchs. These three phratries are the fountain heads<sup>3</sup> from which emanate the numerous clans that comprise the Ao tribe. They practice phratry exogamy where each phratry is a marriage class and clans belonging to the same phratry do not intermarry but marry into the clan of different phratry. While in case of *Mongsen* Moiety if a strain of version regarding their origin is to be considered they would also comprise of three marriage classes with the same role as that of *Chungli* Moiety. *Chungliyimti* is considered as the cradle of civilization for the Aos where massive 'Cultural Revolution' took place giving rise and honing the customs and tradition that is practiced till today. Origin myth and customary practices vary considerably between the two moieties, but we will not discuss these here.

*Ozukum* clan, a major clan of the Ao tribe is detached from the other clan in terms of their origin myth, in that they do not trace their descent to any of the three phatries mentioned above. A matriarch figure, instead, by the name of *Longkongla*<sup>4</sup> occupies the central position in the narration of *Ozukum* origin myth. However, she is not the progenitor of the clan rather a guardian, yet accorded the position of a progenitor, who raised a abandoned baby boy named *Songmaket* (meaning the one who is flawless) who had been transformed from the feather of a hornbill bird, hence the name *Ozukum* (*Ozu*=bird, *akum*=transform), to be the patriarch of the *Ozukum* clan. By virtue of this separate totemic origin, *Ozukum* clan practices clan exogamy as they can marry into any clan belonging to any of the phratries of *Chungli* and *Mongsen* moiety. Even though separated in its origin, unique from the others, *Ozukum* clan is as much a member of the *Chungli* group as any other *Chungli* clans narrating a legend of its origin unfolding at *Chungliyimti*. Out of the numerous clans of Ao tribe *Imsong*, *Pongen* and *Ozukum* clan of *Chungli* group and *Longchar* clan of *Mongsen* group are the only four clans which enjoy the privilege to be *Onger* (chiftianship) traditionally.

### Deconstructing Ao Naga genealogy

Responsibility of conserving and transmitting genealogy in Ao Naga society lies neither solely with an individual nor any specific group of people rather it is the collective effort of the people to which every individual has a stake to claim assuming a crucial intersecting point in the larger social network. Here every individual can trace his lineage to one of the mentioned patriarchs. It can be compared to a branching off of a tree, only far more numerous branches yet all merging into a single trunk, only the roots running into obscurity<sup>5</sup>.

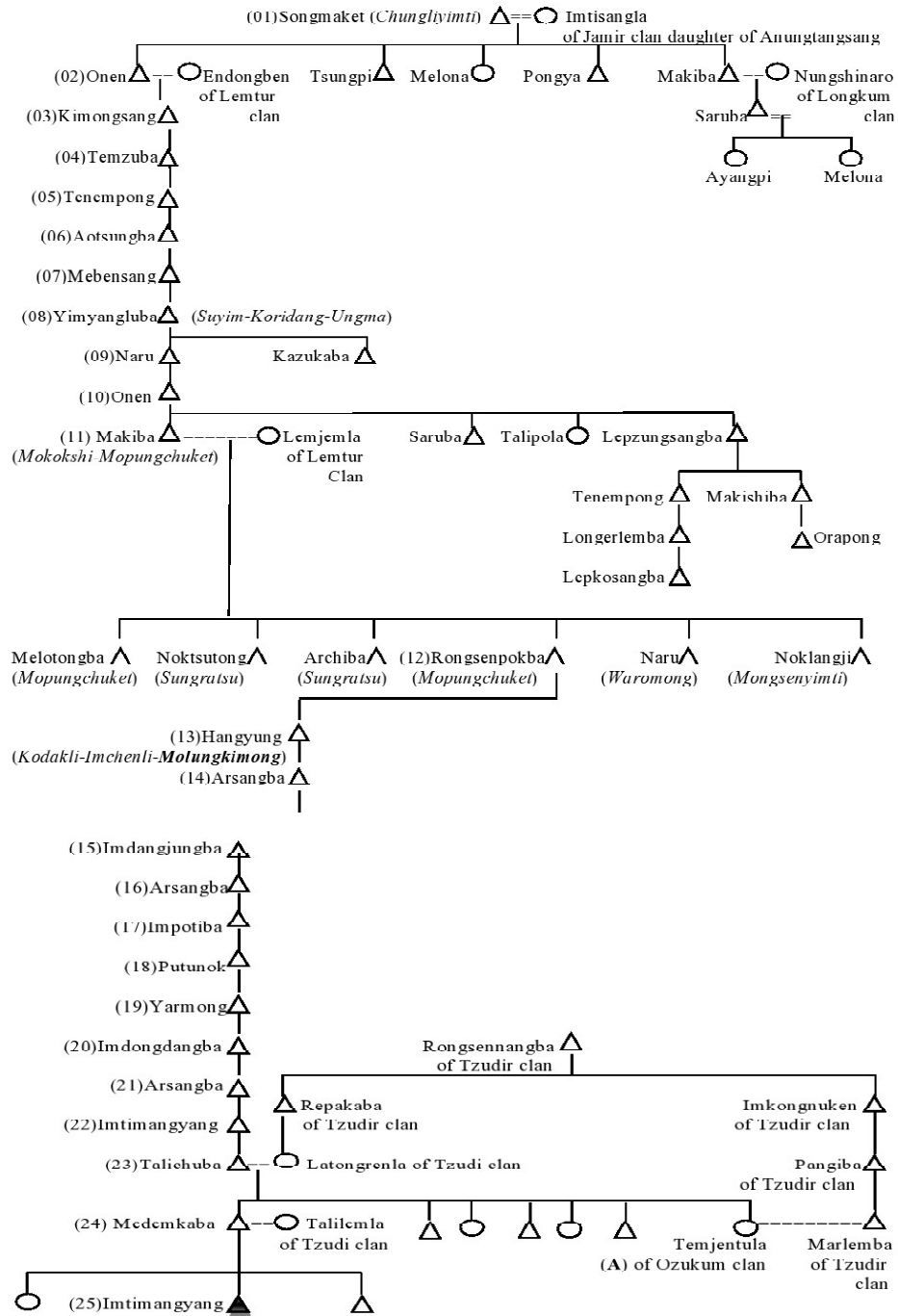
A person is a member of the community by virtue of birth where his first line of identification is his affiliation to the clan. A village is, for all purpose, considered as a unit for social and political life however, an individual acts in the unit in the name of the clan which gets reflected as an act of the clan in spite of being a part of the unit. A clan in this case can be considered as a bigger lineage where decent can be traced as far back as twenty generations. Smaller lineage can be traced as and when required. The knowledge is passed on from elders to the younger generation through the word of mouth, the act of which is viewed as a responsibility and executed with utmost concern and cautiousness through repeated telling. The sense of responsibility with which it was passed on is expected of the youngsters who will in due course of time become the bearer of such valuable knowledge.

However, it should also be noted that when genealogy is sought it automatically invokes deeper consultation among several individuals authenticating and supplementing each others memory thus rectifying and clarifying in the process. The need for wider consultation arises because of the fact that genealogy telling is not simply limited to remembering the name of the father of the great grandfather and his father and so on, which is done with not much difficulty, but the phenomena surrounding the individual in a given social condition and the lore, tales and songs associated with the person make the individual a whole. It is those associated elements along with the individual that will assert the position of the individual and his social relationship with the larger entity, but above all legitimizing his social standing in the customary arena, enjoying privileges, securing a firm footing in claiming rights and ownership for himself and his future descendents. Such phenomena remain relevant in each passing generation and only get augmented with time because the social structure and the political system have largely remained intact in the face of modern civilization. Such narratives are of immense value in events of political arbitration. For instance, *Hangyung*, one of the founder of *Molungkimong* village belonging to *Ozukum* clan, is said to be a man who enjoyed, along with his traditional allotment of meat share<sup>6</sup> i.e head of a swine, an extra share of meat while at *Yimchenkimong* village. However, following an event his extra share of meat was allotted to one *Tongtzuba* of *Tzudir* clan thereby enabling *Tzudir* clan to secure a position at the customary political table. Therefore it becomes imperative for *Ozukum* as well as *Tzudir* clan to

conserve the narration with clarity to safeguard their customary rights which remain relevant in contemporary time with equal significance as it did thirteen generation ago. Apart from the word of mouth there is no written document or any other means to prove the authenticity of *Hangyung's* existence only that it is told widely and a common knowledge not only among the *Ozukum* and *Tzudir* clan but to others too. For instance, while at *Molungkimong* I had the opportunity to attend to an occasion for which I was a part of the party from *Molungkimong* that went to another village for the occasion. There a fine elderly man, a stranger to me of different clan, a *dobashi*<sup>7</sup>, enquired as to which clan I belong, upon my admission as belonging to *Ozukum* clan he exclaimed and I quote '*ahh! A descendent of Hangyung...he was a man who enjoyed two shares of meat,...there are great stories about him..*'. Not everyone is affluent in the narrations of several clans involving numerous individuals and events running through several generations but reservoir of such knowledge can be found in several individuals, usually elderly male person, who carries a wholesome amount of information and time spent with them is certain to get one enlightened. Such were and are the person, by virtue of their eidetic auditory memory and vast knowledge of traditional practices, who acquires social and political position in multiple fronts, the likes of *dobashi*, who are the arbitrator in the customary court.

The genealogy given in coming page traces the descent of the author up to the origin of man, which was acquired from an elderly informant during fieldwork at *Molungkimong* village. The genealogy is an outcome of painstaking research conducted by the *Ozukum* clan, of which my informant is a part, in an effort to document the genealogical history of the clan. Genealogy of similar nature can be found among the other clan of the Ao tribe. The importance of documenting has been realized in the recent decades prompting to engage in preserving the customs and tradition in script ushered by the educated lot. However, documenting the lore and tales, beliefs and practices, and values and norms amassed over centuries is nothing short of a mammoth task in both space and time. The author belongs to the community. The genealogy presented below comprises only those that are of interest to this paper. The abrupt end of some descent between first and twelfth generation is because some of them are women and some did not begets any offspring and therefore their line came to an end.

**LONGKA (A STONE)**



In the genealogy the line of descent is marked beginning with the patriarch of the clan *Songmaket*, numbered 01 and descends down to the author, numbered 25. The bracketed words in italic following the name of persons are the names of the place or village they migrated to or founded.

Genealogy is generally presented in a way that we are already accustomed to beginning with the ego. Tracing descent up to few generations is usually done with ease and it is always contextual depending on the point of inquiry. Not everyone is well versed with such knowledge and remembers the names of bygone generations forthwith, nevertheless it can always be retrieved. The interesting feature of Ao Naga genealogy is that it can be traced up to the origin of man and arrive at a consensus among the widely distributed individuals separated by huge generational gap since their ancestors parted ways. Two individuals belonging to the same clan but whose ancestors parted ways thirteen to fourteen generations ago and established independent villages are agnates in all sense sharing the relation of that of brother and sister and strictly forbidden to marry. The twelfth generation, from the top, shows a stage of dispersing in different directions to form different villages and those are the principal villages where members of *Ozukum* clan are found in higher concentration. All the names of the villages are actual villages and the route of migration they took within the Ao territory are an integral part of tracing genealogy as it gets associated with the individual in the process as a point of justification and legitimizing.

However, the question remains as to how deep the genealogy is accurate, up to which point it comprises of actual person and why the need to have a abrupt origin from non-human ancestor; did it become too numerous to be memorized beyond a point? Or were simply looking for an answer? Such question may never be answered in certainty but by examining the folktales certain level of inference may be drawn about the Ao origin myth. One such glue in the folktales is that of constant reference to an era before *Chungliyimti* as *mebentedkong*; *mebented* meaning untidy or unclean or disorder and *kong* meaning place. Common mode of reference like 'while living at *mebentedkong*' is not uncommon which is referring to an era of social disorder and lawlessness where morality was not a concern and physical relationship between father-daughter, mother-son and brother-sister were said to be typical. Therefore the inference that necessity to conceal unpleasant past resulted in the construction of the origin myth that we hear today would not be too out of order. Among the Aos, with the exception of the most adamant, people generally agree that the origin myth is not to be taken literally, but is simply an idiom signifying a major social restructuring, emerging of a new era with societal norms and customs more specifically with regard to marriage. Women of different clans marrying into *Ozukum* clan can be seen in the given genealogy.

While they seem to be detaching from one myth I was quite amused when some of the people actually suggested to me, in all seriousness, to probe deeper into the history of Ao Naga origin and that in doing so I would discover

that we are a descendant of one of the three siblings of the biblical figure Noah. Here it only seems to negate the point that I made earlier when a junction arrives where logic no more applies and everything is thrown into the mythical realm. However, amongst the Ao the time frame within which the genealogy is constructed should be taken into consideration and the clarity with which it is presented up to certain point where accounts of lineage and marital relationship of theirs and their ancestors can be orally recounted almost uniformly across the length and breadth of Ao country. Customary norms on political and marital affairs are sensitive and observed with cautiousness even today and such institutions are guarded fiercely, the destruction of which would only cost them their most valued social position and the rights their ancestors have earned, the fruit of which they enjoy today be it within a village, clan or the entire community.

Primarily Ao genealogy traces descent through the male line for all purposes. However, female line may also be traced but only up to few generations beyond which only intermediate occurrence may be found as seen in the given genealogy. It is possible to trace the names of each and every living individual belonging to a clan and every dead male ancestor among the Aos making up several thousand individuals. One such exercise can be seen in *Chungli Aier Suiren (Genealogy of Chungli Aier)* published in the year 2010 by *Chungli Aier* clan in which relation of every male individual belonging to *Chungli Aire* clan both living and dead has been traced all merging into a single point of origin, *longtrok*. Names of women ancestors and barren men are hardly remembered unless they held a remarkably significant social status during their life time. A patrilineal society in all its character with admirable cultural sophistication, however, sadly finds the gender female a far too less significant to have a place in its illustrious narrative.

Genealogy is strictly biological which determines the social aspect as well, and if a case of adaption exists they never fully get integrated into the genealogy though they may be in the society. They may be accepted as one of them in time but their origin is not forgotten. Lines of descent comprising ancestors of distant past are often sought in the concerns of marriage. The customary norm does not sanction marriage up to three generations after which it is permitted, provided they belong to different clans of another phratry with the exception of *Ozukum* clan. An example of marriage can be seen in the genealogy given above marked '(A)' which occurred while this research was being conducted. Dispute arose between two parties one claiming that they are in the third generation while the other claimed them to be in the fourth. The problem was; from where to start the counting? Deliberation ensued but fortunately or unfortunately the later party emerged victorious. Here the blood line is carefully scrutinized by both parties and more so if they are not related in any way. For instance if any of the ancestors of the bride-to-be or groom-to-be are found to be of questionable character or mentally challenged or have



suffered huge misfortune or died under mysterious circumstances, no matter how far apart the generation may be, is most certain to cause commotion in the negotiation. Therefore in such case tracing the lineage of a person is not taken lightly and it is an utmost concern to get it right because such blood line is always viewed with doubt.

Using genealogy as a charter in staking social claim is quite common; however disputes generally arise in the chain of events but not regarding the figure itself. In the given genealogy we can see that there are repetitions of names. Such repetition of name occurs when someone is named after their ancestor, in their namesake, the practice of which is quite common and therefore each name represents a separate individual.

The structure of the clan is more or less static where all the clans of the Aotrace their genealogy in the same manner as the one given earlier. Here lineage could be understood as a smaller segment of the genealogy where it commonly originates with the founder of the village. It is possible to have different lineages of the same clan in a village. In the case of *Molungkimong* village members of *Tzudir* clan trace seven lineages which are basically the names of seven of their ancestors who migrated to *Molungkimong* village at different points of time. Such instances can be seen in other clans as well. Nevertheless they are members of the same clan in all sense and entitles at par with founder member of their clan in social and political shareholding. Members belonging to the founder clan are referred to as *Yimpur* in line with that of *dil* among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 214). Let us refer to them as aristocrat, as Evans Pritchard has used for the Nuer, but not aristocratic in nature. 'The aristocrats (*yimpur*) have prestige rather than rank and influence rather than power' (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 215) is an exact reflection of the nature found in Ao socio-political setup. While those who are not a part of the founder clan of the village, they are usually referred to as *ainer*, literally translated as guest, amongst the Ao. In political system the founder clan or the chieftain clan may hold the office of the *Onger* (chief) but usually such position is that of prestige and influence rather than rank and power. The position is ceremonial which is hereditary, not necessarily strictly according to lineage, but definitely in the clan. The system is run in a fairly democratic manner with representation from different clans. In politics, their status remains in the structure not in its function where influence and alliance building is the key. Therefore, even an *ainer* can have significant impact or perhaps take almost total control in certain occasion but the democratic principle which is inherent in their system is always upheld over lording.

We see in this paper that genealogy has a unique way of working things up in the Ao Naga social organization and has direct or indirect influence on all the spheres of social and political life. Genealogy is preserved not solely with an aim for keep sake of familial or clan history, a fancy tale to pass on, but they are considered as actual historical accounts having immediate

repercussions in current social and political discourse. It must also be noted that the accounts, though in principle remain the same, deviations and variations are common occurrences where time depth may be one cause while others may stem from social constraints or ill motives. In the tussle between tradition and modernity, modernity have no doubt caused a massive impact, especially in the way traditions are preserved and communicated with the introduction of Roman script, yet the role of memory still remains the primary means and seems to remain so for some time to come. The Aos seem to derive or attach more value to the part of the narration which they believe is historically accurate rather than the one which they believe is just idiom and charter. Ao Naga genealogy is a one big lineage system in itself from where smaller segments of lineage can be broken off as and when required regardless of how broad or deep it is, especially in the concerns of marriage, inheritance and executing social responsibilities. The closer we look at their social organization and function the more it appears to be less random and following a chain of unwritten and unspoken command emerging out from the relationship itself, disregarding of which may lead to social entropy.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is an outcome of fieldwork conducted from 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2015 to 29<sup>th</sup> April 2016 at Molungkimong village under Mokokchung district in Nagaland as a part of my doctoral program. Fieldwork was funded through UGC-JRF and conducted under the supervision of Prof. Vinay Kumar Srivastava, Department of Anthropology University of Delhi. My heartfelt gratitude goes to my supervisor Prof. Vinay Kumar Srivastava for his guidance and all the informants at Molungkimong village for graciously providing me with the much valued information which goes into writing of this paper.

#### NOTES

1. Naga is a generic term used to refer to a conglomeration of several tribal groups numbering over thirty occupying the Naga Hills in the North-eastern region of India and North-western Burma.
2. Cluster of rocks resembling male and female genitalia from where first men are said to have emerged located at *Chungliiyimti* in *Sangtam* tribal area in Nagaland.
3. 'Fountain head' borrowed from Temsula Ao's *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*.
4. Matriarch of the *Ozukum* clan and a progeny of *Tongpok*. Here *Tongpok* is the name of a phratry as well as considered as name of a person.
5. 'However from a study of their cultural traits we know that they came from the south through the eastern *Thankul* Hills or Somra Tract in Burma; and there are evidence to prove that the Aos stayed at *Chungliiyimti* long enough to reform their culture. The Aos first migrated north touching the outskirts of the present *Chakesang* area and entered *Yimchung* area; whence they went still northward through *Sangtam* area and reached *Chungliiyimti*' (Y.L Roland shimmy 1988:60).
6. It is a system of sharing meat among the political representative in a village political system. Share may be acquired through alliance building or comes as a customary right. The share of *Onger* or the chief is always the head of the animal.

7. They are the arbitrator in the customary court appointed by the government, not necessarily of equal representation from all the villages but someone well accustomed with the customary norms of Aos.

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