

# Folk Groups and *Genna* among the Ao Nagas of North-East India: Silent Values and Functioning

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**ABSTRACT:** A strict conscious and deliberate restriction when a person is consecrated can be called *Genna*. *Genna* is a manifold layer that act both as a prefix as well as a suffix to numerous events. Generally explained as a ‘curious and special form of taboo’ (as quarantine) and ‘as obligatory holiday’, they are general markers of traditional knowledge that requires a performer, the affected/follower and the curser/giver. This paper attempts to understand this meticulous and deliberated complex that purposes as something for ‘more than habit’. Despite the blurred distinction of the folk group associated, the motive and the severity of the belief system is observed to be remained intact. While, it is inadequate to enquire whether equating of the misfortunes is due to the inadequacy or improper following, the salient-covert role is still found to hold its function. The representation of correct performer, his lineage and the institution he belonged conceivably maintained the traditional values or the cultural values of the clan system. *Genna*, therefore, for this paper is understood as a system that forms the mould into which a new mind is cast as it grows up. Taking flight from this, the paper argues that it purposes as a ‘nervous exaltation’ where the interaction of the folk groups is freed and also restricted to achieve certain silent values.

## INTRODUCTION

The traditional Ao Naga culture is luxuriantly embedded with different festivals. Festivals are usually associated with ceremonies, sacrifices, worships and rituals. Routinely, these are charted by a strict conscious and deliberate restriction(s) of a person, a family, a clan or the whole village. Exhibited when the folk group is required to be consecrated which can be called *Genna* or *Anempong*. *Anempong* is a suffix as well as a prefix for all ceremonies and festivals, when the person is purified from all the normal activities entirely. The word that is often confused in explaining *Genna* is ‘taboo’ which is

explained as *anempong*, terminate, restricted (*‘anempong, nokdang and memela’*) (Keitzar, 1999:161) and cleansing ritual (Ao Senden Literature Board, 2019: 21). Yet for the Nagas, the term *Genna* is meant for multiple denotations vis-a-vis “taboo, prohibition, restriction or forbidden” (Longchar and Imchasenla, 2017:7). *Genna* is an obscure term used “to describe a class of social and religious ordinances based on sanctions which derive their validity from a vague sense of mysterious danger which results from disobedience to them”.

The failure to observe or misconduct of which is believed to result in tragedy or misfortune. Marked with total cease and abstinence from all manual works

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that can last from one to six days or even more depending on the severity of the nature.

According to 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” (cf. Elwin, 1969: 514).

For the Ao Naga, “the ceremony, *among*, is preceded and followed by *Genna*, called *anempong*... (these) are public ceremonies and household or individual ceremonies observed throughout the year” (Imchen 1993:51). *Genna*, an observance of strict restriction is a general marker of the local knowledge among the Ao Naga. Though traditionally strictly observed with much anticipation and regard, the relevance and its practices declined after the colonial rule and its widespread administration over the land. The observance and practices of *Genna* too came to a gradual decline with the introduction of Christianity. At present, *anempong* like *Atsütsü Mong*, *Mangkoterong*, *Walokba Mong*, *Lung Kulemba Mong*, etc. have drawn to a conclusion, only with its consolidated distant memory in the oral history. In *Jhum* cultivation observances such as *Alulepden Mong* and *Denden Mong* are still followed; though its degree of observance is restricted to may be a sacrifice of a rooster or a hen. These days, the performer of the ritual can be anybody of the family mostly the husband or the wife accompanied by a prayer to the Christian god. The rich strict and disciplined *Genna* that was followed by the performer is now devoid of the number of days followed in the observance. The degree, therefore, followed earlier is declined drastically, following the traditional practices in a very minute fashion. Some major *Genna* such as *Moatsü Mong* and *Tsiüngrem Mong* became major recognised festivals eventually.

*Genna* for the Ao Naga can be understood with the help of a simple theoretical categorisation: the curser/giver, the performer and the affected/follower. The traditional understanding of all the *anempong* exhibits a cluster of folk groups. ‘Folk’ or folk group’ for this paper has not been neither weighed down by

the burdensome debates, on who is the real folk, nor does subscribe to the rigid definition, generally used in folklore studies. It is rather presented as a useful concept in appreciative of a conceptual framework.

Among the Ao Naga, *Genna*, the first folk group is conceptualised as the curser or the giver, generally regarded as the one that either brings fortune or illness and misfortune to the family or the village. The Ao Naga cultural understanding of which is either the doing of *Lichaba*, the maker of the earth (mostly considered benevolent) or the doings of malevolent spirits in the forest or at the settlement. The dichotomy of which is incongruously blurred since *Lichaba* although considered mostly benevolent can also bring drought, famine and evil doings to a village as well. The second discussion is about the performer of the *Genna* who are mostly the clan leaders, the oldest members of the folk group of the village or a clan. Determined mostly because of their experiences or their expertise in terms of skills and knowledge required to perform the rituals or the consecration. The performers follow a strict ritual to attain certain objectives. And then, there are ones who are concerned or the ones affected. The seeker at times overlaps the roles of both the performer and the affected but never the former one. This duality of role can be observed in certain *Genna* when it is mostly concerned within a family.

#### *Types of Genna Followed Traditionally*

The description given further will help in the understanding of the demands and requirements of the certain roles concerning each folk group. Some of the traditional *Genna* followed are as follows:

*Atsütsü Mong*: To win over enemies during warfare, all the village members are gathered and two brave *putir* (the oldest members in the village) step forward and a rooster is sacrificed by cutting its head away from the body and is thrown in the ground. If the rooster’s body after dying points towards the east, then it is believed to win the battles ahead, if points towards the west, then a failure in the next expedition. The two *putir* undergo the next thirty days as *anempong* and the whole village observes it for the next three days by visiting each household and abstaining from their chores.

*Alulepden Mong*: Every year at the onset of the

first day of a new *jhum* cycle, all the *aola* (leader of each clan) gather and clear a patch of ground in the new field by sacrificing a rooster. The worship is meant for a good harvest. The person who leads this observes *anempong* for thirty days and the whole village for a day.

*Sungkomesü Mong*: To avoid any accident during the cultivation two eldest members of each lineage worships all the path of each field. This two observed *anempong* for six days and the whole villagers for a day.

*Mangkoterong Walokba*: To win over enemies, every year all the *putir* gathers at *mangkoterong* with the biggest pig in the village, a rooster and an egg. They fence the place of the collected trophies by *atsüdong* (a species of bamboo used for fencing). Leading by a leader from Pongen clan (*anpong*) and his follow up from Jamir clan (*khubenba*); these two observed *anempong* for six days and the rest of the villagers for a day.

*Lung kulemba Mong*: To evade burning the village from fire accidents, a leader from Longkumer (*anpong*) leads this worship with his assistant from Meyur clan (*khubenba*). This is accompanied by all the council members of the village, traveling to the stone located at *Sütsükong* with a pig, a rooster and an egg. During this worship, if any traveller from another village crosses this place, then they are hunted down mandatorily. The two leaders observe *anempong* for six days and the village members for a single day.

*Among walokba Mong*: For successful hunting of enemies and wild animals like tiger and wild boar all the *putir* comes together with a pig, a rooster and an egg. This was worshipped towards the south. Also, during this worship, if any traveller from another villages crosses this place, then they are hunted down mandatorily. This was observed for six days, and within this period for any traveller rice and curry packing (*chitem aontem*) was not allowed. Six days *anempong* for the leader of Meyur clan (*anpong*) and Longkumer clan (*khubenba*) were observed, with one day for the whole village.

*Denden Mong*: For rich harvest before sowing of the seeds in the field, an honest elder from a lineage is selected (this is a cyclic process, with each lineage selecting their representation in the succeeding years). The other members of the lineage presented him thirty *yimchi* of rice grain (three *yimchi* makes two metal tins of rice grain). He is called *dendensang*

and he observes *anempong* for six days and the village members observe for one day.

*Merstünpang Entok Mong*: After the completion of the sowing of seeds in the fields, the *Arujuor* dormitory members the following day goes for a parade along the village proclaiming that the sowing task is completed. The next day the whole village observes *anempong*.

*Moatsü Mong*: Everything bountiful that is blessed and grown in the field is believed to be from *Lichaba*. These three days festival marks the thanksgiving for the blessings bestowed upon themselves. This day is marked by the celebration from all the age set by slaughtering a pig and a cow. The meat of which is also given to all the widows in the village. This festival is capped off by strolling to the houses of all the widows.

*Lichaba Mong*: Set after the summer or the rainy season, to avoid any sickness in the family this one-day worship is marked by honouring *Lichaba*. Led by all the *Putir* by sacrificing a pig, a rooster and an egg. On this day, in the door a leaf called *tsüngpet* (*Zanthoxylum sp.*) is hooked and observed strictly.

*Modem Mong*: Two eldest members of each lineage line selects a plot of land in a range and fence a small portion of the land. After collecting an amalgamated sample of all the seeds sown in the field, it is placed inside the fenced land. The sacrifice is instigated by a rooster. The villagers observe this *anempong* for a single day for munificent harvest.

*Momesü Mong*: To avoid any death of rice stalk in the field the whole village use to observe this ritual for one day.

*Kwiyapo Mong*: To save the vegetation from rats, all the village members observe this. The *Aruju* members distribute the field areas among themselves and would hunt down the rats; the hunted rats are collected and kept at the centre of the village (*yimrong*) and during sunset the rats are thrown in the river. This was observed for one day.

*Jameja Mong*: With the village council system when revered to be changed with passing tenure, the younger age set to *tatar* observes this for a day. All the members give a rupee each to the preceding junior of theirs – *lanur*. The ruling age set collects a rooster and is obstinately killed and *ange* is examined.



Figure 1: Tsümpet (*Zanthoxylum sp.*), the plant used to ward off ill doings of a god  
(Source: Fieldwork by author)

*Meyirepten Mong*: Right before the start of the harvest in the field, *dendensang* completes his ninety days of *anempong*. During the first harvest in the field, he boils the leaves of the rice grains and drinks it, only then the harvest can begin in the fields of the village.

*Longbenpo Mong*: To save the crops in the field from the caterpillars, all the cultivators have to pick one caterpillar and is pounded in one *Pongdang* (a storing jar made of bamboo) mixed with one chilli, cursed and thrown. This was observed for one day.

*Tsüngrem Mong*: For all the bountiful blessings whole through the day and wellbeing of all individuals, this was marked as a thanksgiving festival to God. It is a three-day feast celebrated with donating pig/pigs and cow/cows.

*Shekolak Aremdok Mong*: If there was a famine in the village, people resorted to tuber supplements from a *Fabaceae* family especially a local species called *she*, a leguminous plant grown in forests. During harvest of rice in the field, people thought since now we have rice, let us avoid eating *she* and correspondingly the head portion of the legume is removed and thrown away. This is a day affair.

*Tsübukelem Mong*: Not to let the water in the brooks and streams to dry, a leader from Jamir clan (*anpong*) leads this by sacrificing a pig, a hen and an egg near the water source. The worship of the water source is observed for six days.

*Longtitsüingbaaluba Mong*: To signify the coming down of God from the sky, *Longtitsüingba*,

the council members buy the biggest cow in the village and this festival was observed for one day. The price of the cow is paid by collecting one *yimchi* each or rice grains from each household in the village. The remaining rice grain is kept at the place of *aola* and is brewed and later consumed.

*YimKulemshi Mong*: For successful hunt of trophies and to stir the village towards prosperity, the council members sacrifice pig, hen and egg. During the sacrificial day, people who are blind, deaf, and who are abled differently are not allowed to touch any utensils and are asked to sit quietly, their age set members serve them their food on the sacrificial feast day. This was observed for six days.

*Nura Agi Asuba Mong*: For any instances where a woman dies while giving birth, the whole villagers observed *anempong* for three days. And all the belongings of that household are burnt down or are not used any further (the process is called as *menentok*).

*Arüsü Mong*: If any member of the village is hunted down by enemies, the whole village observed *anempong* for three days.

*Azü Resa Mong*: A person during any expedition, if encounters any other village members carrying a trophy to *mangoterong*, on his return, he is said to announce this to the villagers and the whole village observes *anempong* for a day to avoid the sin from entering the village.

*Kirong Remzüik Mong*: Again, if a person during any expedition encounters the burning of any

household/s or a village; the village, on his return observes a day of *anempong* to avoid the sin entering the village.

*Keyilepsetba Mong*: For any successful hunt of tiger in the village territory, for more such successful hunts the villagers observe one day of *anempong* seeking blessing.

*Keyi Kolak Aputepba Mong*: If two contesting persons for any dispute seek justice then they are asked to carry the head of a hunted tiger along with the village. The villagers observe a day of *anempong* and the two contesting families for six days each. During the six days of *anempong*, the council members observe the two families under tight scrutiny. Any misfortune or sickness in any of the two families is attributed to faulty and penalised. The two contesting parties observe *anempong* for more 30 days and the offspring of such parties are never allowed for inter marriage thereafter.

*Ankong Alang Mong*: Another justice-seeking practice, between two contesting people for any disputes, seeks justice by cutting off the head of a hen, the village observes a day of *anempong* and the two families for six days each. During the six days of *anempong*, the council members observe the two families under tight scrutiny. Misfortune or sickness in any of the two families was regarded as the faulty party. The two-contesting member observes *anempong* for more 30 days and the offspring of such contesting parties are banned for intermarriage.

*Sü Achiba Mong*: If any family gives a village feast by donating a *sü/mithun*, the whole village members observe *anempong* for a day and the donating family is not supposed to eat any food from other families till the next harvest. During the wait for the next harvest the whole family is said to observe *anempong*, sanctifying themselves.

*Wara Lepdang Mong*: *Wara* meaning influenza or flu and *lepdang* to interject or to interpolate. An *anempong* observed for one day to halt the flu or any sickness entering the village or to expel from the village, the oldest member of Pongen clan leads this procession by chaining a dog and holding it. The oldest man of Longkumer clan is supposed to kill the dog and the dog is kept at the top of the village graveyard.

*Aruju Asüba Mong*: The oldest bachelor of Pongen clan called *Süngkoyimyu* acts as the treasurer for building the village dormitory when required to reconstruct. Until the completion of the *Aruju*, all the village members observe *anempong*.

*Süngkong Walok Mong*: To sharpen the sound of the long drum (*süngkong*), the council members select a speckles pig and sacrificed it. *Anempong* for this was for a day.

*Mangoterong-i Atoba Mong*: For any expedition for trophies or on return of any successful expedition or war, a group of people which include his friend, his consanguine brothers and clan members and all the *Aruju* members is said to walk up to *mangoterong* and erect the trophies. In honour of the warrior, the whole village observes *anempong* for one day by composing a song and adorning him with appropriate attires.

*Anükulem Mong*: During any incessant rainfall in the village, the Jamir clan leading by the *anpong* worships the sun with a rooster, believing that the sun will overcome the rainfall. An *anempong* of six days, where the rooster's feathers are spread in a valley during the worship.

*Tsüngluja Mong*: An *anempong* of one day, during any drought period or of incessant sunshine which leads to death of crops in the field, Jamir clan, the founder of water, worships the rain by summoning it down to the land.

*Among Süng Kozüka Tsükba Mong*: During bad weather conditions or hurricanes if any of the trees or branches near the village gate uproots or disrupts the consistency, the whole village observes *anempong* for a day.

*Among Tarok Anenzükba Aluba Mong*: For any landslides in some sacred lands the villagers observe one day as *anempong*.

#### *Certain Understandings*

Most of the *Genna* that was strictly observed stems from a belief system where the belief system emphasised the existence of a giver and someone who bless the people. The belief too emphasised that the giver should be worshipped with sacrifices. These sacrifices mainly consisted of a rooster, a hen, an egg and in some major *Genna* an ox, a cow, or a pig.

The direction of the sacrifices is mostly directed to appease the spirit of the land (mostly) or an object (for an example a stone) and in return to accumulate or receive the blessings from the god they believed in. These worships and sacrifices gradually moved and changed toward the god which Christianity introduced. An approximate number of days spent in the observance of *Genna* in a year can be calculated one for the performer and another for the entire village or villagers which accounts for 264 (inclusive of all the clan division) and 41 days respectively.

For every walk of life, there was a humble mind willing to appease the god they believed in, even in times of misfortunes or natural calamities, accidents or plagues. Every step of the traditional life and their livelihood depended on these observations and the systematic following. Misfortunes were equated to improper and inadequacy in the rituals and lives lived. 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” (Mills, 1926: 214).

Observance like the *Jameja Mong* or any *Genna* that require a performer allowed people into knowing not only the performer and his clan but the *Genna* acted in strengthening the rich clan and lineage relationships and its institutions. The representation of a clan member or a *putir* or a *jameja* perhaps maintained the traditional values of the clan system among the Ao Naga, apart from marriages and age set system.

*Genna* is a multifold layer as it acts both as a prefix or/as well as a suffix to any events among the Ao Naga. It acts as a precaution mechanism to ward off evil spirits or misfortunes from happening to them and also acts as an event to worship the bountiful blessings in the field or domesticated animals in the homestead. The self-restraint or the celibacy of the performer and the village is the utmost priority, since a slight mistake on the part of the observation is believed to lead to consequences such as misfortunes, illness or in some cases death of a person or even decline of a clan. The degree of the belief the people had towards the *Genna* and its repercussion resulted in a belief system that made up a large portion of the local knowledge system in all the villages of the Ao

Naga. *Genna* among the Ao Naga is the outward expressions of faith that they had in their surroundings. Thus, providing it with ‘a peculiar extrinsic validity’. Hobhouse in Hodson (1910: 297) explains “at a low grade of reflection there is a little room for doubting that at bottom custom is held sacred because it is custom. It is what is handed on by tradition and forms the mould into which each new mind is cast as it grows up. Thus, while for the society it is custom, for the individual it has something of the force of habit and more than habit.”

The strength of the *Genna* system among the Ao Naga lies ‘an indirectness and uncertainty of its sanctions’. Almost all the *Genna* are peculiarly connected revolving around a central theme i.e., man, as hunting during the cultivation period can bring a shortage of harvest in the field, violation of a *Genna* or a taboo like hunting during the pregnant state of the wife would specifically bring the death of the child or being born as the animals hunted down. Thus, there exists a ‘nervous exaltation’. Any misfortunes would be attributed to any of these shortcomings or failings. Sometimes, all may suffer for the default of just one, thereon, the business of one becomes business for all to see that his neighbour keeps and abides by the law.

*Genna* among the Ao Naga acts in two folds as a ‘curious and special form of taboo (as a quarantine)’ and ‘as an obligatory holiday’ (Katz, 1928). *Genna* is a period where neither the members from the village may depart nor a stranger from another may enter the village. An example worth mentioning of the famous *Lijaba* folktale - “*Lijaba* came disguised as an old man ... He went from door to door ... but everyone gave their own excuses saying, behold we are observing *anempong*” (Bhattacharya and Pachuau, 2019: 269). For the Ao Naga, in the *Genna* complex mentioned by Katz (1928) erection of memorials is completely absent; the social *Genna* as a means of ‘social advancement’ (performance of a succession of ceremonies through the feast of merit) is present but not as deliberated and meticulous as he described in the case of the Angami Naga.

## CONCLUSION

*Genna* and the folk group among the Ao Naga are, therefore, predicaments where the traditional ideas

continue to prevail, detriment off a large segment of practices. There is, in *Genna*, a certain degree of cultural binding that dictates and underlines the association of the wellbeing of the individual and the understanding of the environment, the man-nature relationship as well as the simplistic explanations the people have adopted. Thus, Ao Naga *Genna* functions, as a silent value that embeds and prevails the possibility of the peoples' behaviour towards each other as well as towards nature and its beings.

#### NOTES

*Mangkoterong* is the place where the hunted trophies are kept. Jubilations and festivities are centred around this place.

*Lichaba* is a male god among the Ao, who is regarded as the creator of earth. The term is derived from the words 'li' or 'ali' meaning earth and 'cha' or 'aja' meaning to call or to summon. And 'ba' is the suffix used at the end of majority of the male names amongst Ao people.

*Ange* is the process where the caeca of the chicken internal is examined, the posterior or *tachiji* is equated to male and the left caeca is parallel to female, *tabelen*. The bigger caeca if located on the right and if the chicken is forfeited for a sick male in the family, then he would eventually overcome his sickness. For cases, where any sickness pertaining to *mepongsemor* due to malicious act of spirits is chanced upon, then the caeca on the right is equated to the living ones. The bigger the caeca is on any side, the more probability of endearing the sickness or the misfortune or more probable it is to succumb oneself to it, some cases leading to even eventual losing of one's life.

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