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DRINKING CULTURE IN AO-NAGA SOCIETY: FROM RICE BEER TO ALCOHOL

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ABSTRACT

In the traditional Ao society of Nagaland, food and drink were not only seen as basic needs for survival but they also acquired sacred values being used in religious rites and rituals and offered to the Spirits to appease them. Rice beer was the common drink that was brewed in every household and drunk at all time. Since rice was the staple food and the people cultivated it as the major crop, production and consumption of rice beer was ecologically and economically viable and sustainable. However, this ubiquitous drink slowly disappeared with the dawn of Christianity. Brewing and drinking of rice beer was seen as 'unchristian' and therefore a sin. The Ao tribals were introduced to tea with sugar and later alcohol which completely affected them economically, socially and physically. The consequences were far reaching and disruptive and continue to be so even today. This paper examines the ancestral practice of brewing and drinking of rice beer, the ethics behind their drinking culture but also the larger concern is a review of how the colonial's moral sanction and religious affiliation seeped into the cultural space and dislodged the humble rice beer. The general contention here is when and why drinking of rice beer ceased to be a cultural activity and became a moral issue and the social consequences that followed.

**Key words:** rice beer, Christianity, culture, society, alcohol

The basic understanding of food is that it is a substance essential for living and growth. Food is not something that we eat only to stave off hunger but with time it comes to acquire different meanings. Environment and ecology affect the kind of food that one produces, prepares and consumes. Although consumption of food is a physiological need, the choice of food is cultural and the prevalent social attitude controls that choice. The values and acceptance one's culture has placed upon a particular food item largely influences what one eats. Thus, what is edible and even a delicacy in one culture is a taboo in another. This makes food a visible symbol of identity of a community making its consumption much more than gastronomy. Cultural, political, economic and spiritual meanings and the environment that produces it cluster around a food item.

This paper explores the drinking culture in the Ao-Naga society before and after the dawn of Christianity. This paper employs auto- ethnography as its methodology. Complying with N.K Denzin's idea of

research, "auto involves the turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur" (*Interpretive Ethnography*, 227). While the specific concern of this paper is with the ancestral practice of brewing and drinking of rice beer, the larger concern is a review of how the colonial's moral sanction and religious affiliation seeped into the cultural space and dislodged the humble rice beer. The general contention here is when and why drinking of rice beer ceased to be a cultural activity and became a moral issue and the social consequences that followed. This deliberation is also based on the present condition of the Naga society gripped tightly in the tentacles of alcoholism which calls for an examination of the drinking culture and the functional role of drinks in the past and the present. The paper, however, is limited to the experience of the Ao tribe in Nagaland.

### **The Aos of Nagaland**

The Aos belong to a major tribe in Nagaland which is today considered as one of the most advanced and populous communities. The original home of the Aos is Mokokchung district in the northern part of Nagaland. Essentially an indigenous society, they believed that their ancestors sprung from six stones, believed in the existence of Supernatural Beings and had their own religious system. The people and the land were intimately connected. The first tribe in Nagaland to embrace Christianity in the 19th century, today Christianity is the dominant religion of the Aos.

### **Foodways of the Aos**

An investigation in foodways involves an analysis of food acquisition, eating, sharing and also the beliefs that surround its production, distribution and consumption. The food platter of the Aos consists of both dried and fresh foods which are baked, roasted or boiled. To preserve food for future consumption they resort to drying in the sun or fermenting it. The most important and staple item in their diet is rice and it is consumed at least twice a day. Meat such as pork, chicken or fish and vegetables which are primarily boiled and spicy chilli and tomato sauces are the general accompaniments of rice. The native community although devoid of any modern facilities was a self-sustaining one producing all the food they consumed. Seasonal hunting and fishing were the other means of producing food apart from agriculture. The Aos cultivated rice as the major crop and other seasonal vegetables. Shifting cultivation is more popular among the Aos and they practised it on a large scale. In this system of agriculture they rotate the use of land. They would normally do cropping for a period of one to two years and keep the land fallow for five to seven years. Slash and burn method clears the forest. Field works are clearly bifurcated between men and women and men carry out the activity of slashing and burning while women engage themselves in sowing and weeding. Harvest time is a joyous occasion where men, women and children participate and engage in singing as they work.

When paddy is ripe for harvesting the stalks are cut, then men thresh them manually before winnowing to separate the chaff. The unhusked rice is then taken home and stored in the *tsükjen* (granary) and retrieved from it as and when the need for consumption arises. The traditional way of preparing the rice ready for consumption involved a process. They would dry the unhusked rice in the sun and after that pound it with mortar and pestle. The rice was then cleaned and boiled in an earthen pot. A bountiful harvest indicated the family's social class in the village as the quantity of rice a family possessed was a mark of their affluence. A hearty traditional meal consists of rice, boiled vegetables, fish or meat. Their normal meal pattern was a full meal of rice in the morning before setting out to the field, another in the afternoon and then again at night for dinner. Thus, rice was the most important and integral food item in their meals.

### **Preparation and consumption of rice beer:**

Mary Douglas has come up with two broad categories of food in her work "Deciphering a Meal" as meals and drinks. Meals consist of both liquids and solids both from animal and plant sources and eaten at a structured time and place and more personal, whereas consumption of drinks are less structured and it carries with it the idea of camaraderie with friends, acquaintances and family.

In the Ao society, the most popular and easily available beverage was the rice beer. Rice beer was the common drink. They brewed it in every household and men and women, young and old alike drank it at all time and in all circumstances. It was considered a healthy drink, filling and refreshing especially after a day's hard work and affordable since the community was primarily agrarian. Their food habits being very simple, rice beer was the only drink known to them. A folk tale records the discovery of rice beer and how it eventually became a part of their life.

The tale says that a young boy was ill treated by his stepmother when his father was away at the battles. The stepmother would send the boy to the field to work but every day she gave him only a pack of stale rice. The rice being unfit for consumption, the boy would fasten it onto a tree. Many days passed and one day, he got a sweet flavour in the air. He looked around and realised that the sweet smell emanated from the packs of rotten rice he had tied onto the tree. He took them down, tasted a bit of it and realised that the rice had become fermented and the taste was delicious with a sweet flavour. From this day on, the fermented rice became his diet and people noticed that his complexion had changed, and he had grown strong and healthy. The stepmother was curious to know how the boy got colour in his cheeks and strength and vigour despite giving him only stale rice. She finally probed the boy and wrenched the secret out from him. The boy shared the fermented rice with his people and they liked it. According to oral tradition, this is the origin of rice beer.

Although there is no proof of the authenticity of this story, an analysis of the food sources and foodways of the Aos shows that drinking of rice beer seamlessly fit into their lifestyle as rice was easily available to them. Preparation of rice beer was also easy and quite economical as all the raw materials were at their disposal. To make the fermenting agent, they would soak a small quantity of rice, dry it in the sun and pound with the leaves of the locally available nightshade plant and another leaf called *yiningrang* (the tree on which the boy tied his rice packs in the folk tale). Any type of rice could be used for preparing rice beer and it would be cooked in the usual way. Then once the cooked rice had cooled down, the ground mixture was sprinkled on it and mixed thoroughly and kept covered for two or three days. Rice would ferment quicker if the days were sunny and warm and the process would take longer if it was rainy and cold. The same pot of fermented rice produced two types of rice beer. When fermentation had taken place for long enough, one would find a milky viscous liquid pooled at the bottom of the pot and the mass of cooked rice floating on top. This liquid would be strained and collected separately. This was called as *mejemsü* and considered as the best rice beer. They usually preserved *Mejemsü* for special guests and occasions. After straining the liquid from the pot, the left over rice could still be used to squeeze out the remaining liquid out of it. This liquid was lighter in colour and density and was considered of a lesser quality than *mejemsü*.

#### **Drinking culture and its cultural significance**

Since all the families were rice-growers it was possible for the people to not only eat rice for every meal but also have a steady produce of rice beer in their daily life. Rice beer was drunk at all personal and social contexts and unlike meals which have an ordered time and quantity, consumption of rice beer was less structured. Be it while working in the paddy field, at home with family or guests or feast of merit, festivals or rituals, drinking of rice beer always carried a note of warmth, camaraderie and positivity. It brought about a social cohesion as most of the time drinking was not an individual activity. It was a beverage that offered refreshment when tired, satiation when hungry and joy and pleasure at merrymakings.

It is interesting to note that rice beer was more than a drink because it was so central to the life and activities of the people and served many functions. It also acquired religious attributes as for every religious ritual rice beer was used as an offering. For instance, an important ceremony among the Aos is called *Sungkomeshimong* which is the dedication of a new plot of land for cultivation. After clearing the forest, a hearth would be made and the head of the family would conduct a ritual of offering rice beer to their god. He would offer the cup and invite god to drink first and ceremoniously pour out a little before drinking it himself. This ritual was conducted to invoke the protection of god upon them as they work their fields and also to plead for blessings of a rich harvest. After slashing the forest burning it down would take place after about two or three months. The next day each family would set out to the field armed with their sacrificial animals like pigs

or chicken and eggs depending on what they could afford. This sacrifice was made to bless the work of their hands. The ritual would start with the offering of rice beer.

The Ao culture reflects a deep connection with the land and land was the primary source of their livelihood. Every activity related to land was preceded by a ceremony of offering to god. For instance, once the forest was slashed, burnt and cleaned and the land was ready for cultivation, there would be a ceremony to sanctify the seeds and another ceremony in the field before the sowing process began. All these rituals were done to ask for protection and their physical wellbeing and most importantly to bless them with good paddy plants so that it will yield a bountiful harvest. Very significantly in all these ceremonies rice beer was one of the most important offering items.

Apart from the sacred attributes, rice beer also had a pivotal social dimension to it and every festival and special occasions saw plenty of it. *Moatsü* which is one of the biggest festivals of the Aos comes right after the sowing of seeds is over. They celebrated it for six days and the whole celebration was about invoking god's blessings on the seeds they had sowed. For this festival, special rice beer would be brewed and everybody enjoyed drinking it as they sang and danced. Consumption of rice beer was a part and parcel of their feasting. Furthermore rice beer was also used in ceremonies which were conducted to ward off evil spirits, plague, sickness and calamities of any nature.

From all these usages, it can be understood that rice beer was not just a drink but the community had placed upon it immense cultural significance and value. It was a drink not only for mortals but also sacred enough for the gods and strong enough to appease the evil spirits. It had economic, nutritional, religious and moral values. To put it succinctly, this beverage was a cultural symbol of the Aos. Although it was easily made and found in abundance, drinking of rice beer was not abused. Social disruption or drunken brawls were absent as people did not suffer from intoxication. As much as they enjoyed drinking it, they valued self-control as a virtue. This moral lesson was imparted through the story of the poor boy who discovered rice beer. People were warned that if rice beer was misused or abused, then one would fall into poverty and hard times because it was discovered by one who was in such a circumstance. This oral narrative served as a deterrent and also perhaps alluded to the respect and importance rice beer was given.

The use of rice beer for religious cultural and social practices shows a balance between culture and ecology. Like all other indigenous people over the world who meet a substantial proportion of their resources from nature, the foodways of the Aos and the way they consumed or used it for various purposes were directly influenced by their ecology. Daily life, cultural identity and traditional practices were directly influenced by the ecosystem in which they lived.

#### **Food politics and manipulation of food values:**

Food selection and choice of food for consumption varies from culture to culture. Every food item has a certain taste, flavour, texture and colour but the acceptance of the food item and the value placed on it is shaped by one's culture. Because of this cultural influence the same food item could be foul-smelling for one and delectable for others. For instance most of the food consumed by the Aos are spicy, pungent and with strong flavours. Bitter, sour and hot tastes are preferred to sweet. One of the favourite food items is fermented soya bean. Among the Nagas it is commonly called as *Akhuni*. This food item is not favoured by 'others' who find its strong smell of fermentation obnoxious and unpalatable. Besides taste buds, cultural interpretation of a food item also greatly differs across cultures. A classic example of this is the consumption of dog meat. While in Ao society (and the Nagas in general), it is considered a delicacy, the very thought of 'dogs as consumable' is disgusting, repulsive and unacceptable in some other societies. This clash of attitudes occurs because most people consider dogs as man's best friend and favourite pet animal. Dogs even acquire the status of a family member in most families and therefore, slaughtering and eating it seems like an inhuman act.

As one delves deeper into the dynamics of food, the more one discovers the politics associated with it. In every culture food is not just a mere substance for consumption but it carries with it a coded message.

This message is decoded differently according to the cultural practices and social dynamics. In India, the caste system not only stratifies the society but also controls the dietary and culinary practices. A Brahmin who occupies the top position in the caste hierarchy is generally a vegetarian. Garlic and onions are the basic ingredients in most Indian dishes but an orthodox Brahmin would refrain from consuming it. However, this is a general observation and there are cases of exceptions. Just as caste and regional locations influence the dietary habits, religion also has a strong influence. Hindu vegetarianism is widespread but at the same time there are many Hindus who consume meat. Religious influence is seen even in the preparation of food such as the Muslim halal.

The importance of food lies in what it signifies and not in itself. Everybody eats food but not everybody eats the same thing. Some food are preferred, some rejected, some shared across cultural boundaries while some are restricted within cultural limits. This idea is reinforced by Barthes saying that "Food is also charged with signifying the situation in which it is used" (Barthes 34). Thus, food is imbued with contextual, symbolic and emotional values and so it can either become a source of great bonding or an exclusive agent that keeps people apart. Since food traverses across cultures and it has versatile attributes a negotiation of foodways is necessary if there is to be a happy mix of traditional and outsider's cuisines at the food table.

In this vein, in the context of the Aos, the status of their ubiquitous rice beer underwent massive changes due to the prohibitionist ideas of the American missionaries. The white missionaries who came from a totally different world and cultural background displayed an offensive attitude towards the fermented rice beer. Perhaps their attitude towards the drink was more influenced by the smell of it rather than by religious beliefs and one cannot help but wonder if their attitude would have been the same if the Aos had grown grapes and made wine out of it.

#### **Christianity and the Status of Rice beer:**

Although Edward Winter Clark and his wife Mary Mead Clark are associated with the pioneering evangelical endeavours among the Ao Nagas, Godhula an Assamese convert was the first Missionary for the Aos. As the Gospel spread, the Aos experienced a culture shift. In this culture shift rice beer culture was eliminated from their society. The missionaries imposed stringent restrictions on drinking rice beer. Arkotong Longkumer argues that the "Baptist missionaries in Assam and the Naga Hills believed they could sift 'nominal converts' from 'actual converts' because people often swayed between ancestral practices and Christianity" (8). Rice beer which was a symbol of cultural identity and enjoyed sacred status suddenly was found defiled and caught in the crossfire between western and traditional perspectives. Rice beer became a marker for the heathen and abstinence from it was considered a trademark of the civilised in the New World. Longkumer continues "amongst the Ao Nagas, those wanting to be baptised had to furnish evidence that they had not been drinking rice-beer for at least three months. Abstention—an Ao Christian would refer to himself as 'a man who does not drink "*madhu*" (rice-beer)'—was often regarded as the hallmark of Christianity" (8). Acceptance of Christianity brought about massive changes in the personal and social life of these tribal people who otherwise were not exposed to outside influences at all.

The core of their culture became questionable as the missionaries looked at everything about the tribals through the lens of colonialism, putting upon themselves the white man's burden to civilize the heathens. They judged the people using the whites' standard and denounced elements of the Ao culture which were not within their own culture and Christianity as sin, crude, animistic and barbarous. Education was introduced, modern clothing provided and people were initiated into the process of civilising and refinement. Thus, the Ao people headed towards progress in one direction which the missionaries viewed as movement from 'darkness to light.' All traditional rituals and customs were branded as heathenism and people were dissuaded from participating in feasts and festivals. With the conversion and baptism by water, people were made to give up many things that defined who they were and what they were. In this regard the most noticeable change in a convert was the cessation of drinking rice beer.

What the missionaries failed to understand was the ethos of the Ao culture and realise that rice beer was a part of the regular diet of the people. This local drink which did not feature in the standard western diet was considered by the missionaries as an intoxicating drink and lavish drinking of rice beer as 'unchristian.' By banning consumption of rice beer and participation in feast and festivals, the missionaries gave the Bible and the message of salvation with one hand and with the other hand took away the essence of a culture. They not only introduced Christianity but also a new way of life, food and dress habits. People began to value the importance of literacy and started sending their children to school and church. Becoming a Christian, getting an education and disengaging from ancestral practices became the trappings of the new generation.

Viewed in this light, conversion resulted in 'colonization of culture,' thus erasing their cultural identity. The general message of colonization was that western civilization was the best and hence westernization and Christianity worked in tandem. This attitude was reflected in the action of the missionaries. They failed to work out a cultural interaction and based only on their western ethos attached stigma to the popular rice beer which was once a cultural identity as shameful and unclean. They denounced everything that was outside of their culture; all other cultures and tradition must evolve and change to come under the ambit of the western civilization.

As evangelism spread, the people were made to feel that essentially they were in a primordial stage and that all their pagan practices need to be replaced by the superior and modern culture. Native belief system was dismantled and they also introduced the idea of purity and pollution with regard to food and drinks. As mentioned earlier a negotiation of foodways did not happen and also since taste buds are largely influenced by one's culture, the missionaries may have found the practice of drinking rice beer alien to their food habits. The milky viscous substance which was economically viable, socially popular and had moral sanction was to them smelly and unpleasant. Rice beer became a conspicuous divider between the Christians and the non-Christians. It became an agent that divided people within families and in the villages.

The Christian missionaries defended the banning of rice beer saying, "'No madhu' means more rice to eat and no drunkenness means fewer quarrels and less sexual immorality" but J.P Mills differs from this opinion that though it may be true to some extent, forcing complete teetotalism would result in "the danger of secret drinking (entailing hypocrisy), and the adoption of evil substitutes for the comparatively harmless rice-beer (417). Mills continues to critically opine that the "gravest" mistake with the potential of being dangerous for the future that the missionaries committed was the imposition of an "alien Western culture on the converts" (420). He criticizes them that no one really conducted a deep study of the Ao customs and they were only too "eager to uproot what they neither understand nor sympathize with, and to substitute for it a superficial civilization" (421).

J.J. Roy Burman also makes a very objective study on the impact of Christianity among the tribals of North-East India and states that the greatest effect was on the "life style and consumption pattern" (74). The Aos soon got acquainted with the habit of drinking tea with sugar and later alcohol. This had a huge impact on them economically, socially and physically. As opposed to the rice beer that was locally produced and affordable, both sugar and alcohol had to be procured from outside the state. Therefore, people started to spend money on purchasing sugar and alcohol. This brought in a problem by way of creating a division between those who could afford and those who could not. Earlier any family could entertain their guests with rice beer as it was easily available but with the banning of rice beer and the introduction of a new beverage, it became an extravagant necessity to have milk, tea leaves and sugar in order to offer a cup of tea to guests. Nowadays it is considered as a social disgrace if one cannot afford to offer tea to their guests.

#### **Colonialism and cultural appropriation:**

With more than hundred years of Christianity in the Ao region, almost all the Ao people especially the present generations are all Christians. The mission policy carried out to refine the lifestyle of the Aos had more serious implications than the obvious. Foreign clothes, a symbol of refinement, were given to people who attended school. However, what one wears can influence one's mental and physical performance to a great extent. They unconsciously adopted the foreigner's attitude and began to devalue manual labour which was

the bedrock of their civilization. Having received a rudimentary education now, this kind of people did not want to farm and grow rice anymore. Hence there were less rice growers and a new generation that worked with a pen was born. A shift from home sources to dependence on foreign (outside) products is seen henceforth.

With this change in society, the outlook of the people towards their culture and land has changed. The ideas and concepts of the environment, culture, tradition and self sustenance have altered. Traditional garbs and ornaments were discarded for the western clothes and conversion to Christianity resulted in the loss of the art like the traditional style of singing and dancing as Christian hymns became popular. Adopting an alien life style also led to the coming up of markets for trade items like clothes, sugar and tea thereby, turning a self-sustained society from producers to consumers. Once a proud people who wore clothes spun from the cotton they grew, used plants to give colourful hues to their cloths, lived on rice and vegetables they grew and wild and domestic animals that were available from their environment, the Ao society gradually became mercenary. The anxiety for a more comfortable life only increased with time. A modern era was ushered in with educated people holding white collared jobs but it also simultaneously ushered in a drunken modernity.

### Transition from rice beer to alcohol

The culture of alcohol drinking became rampant in Nagaland especially after India's independence when there was free flow of Indian-made foreign liquor. Addiction to alcohol plunged many into penury, ailments and violence and this elicited radical reactions from the church and other organizations on religious and ethical concerns and rallied for prohibition of alcohol sale in the state. The prohibition Act came into force in 1989 and it has achieved but feeble effects in curbing alcoholism. In fact the people have given up one 'evil' (rice beer from Christian perspective) and purchased a greater evil. Churches and organizations across the segments of society are on a war-footing with alcohol. Young and old alike are afflicted with alcohol addiction, bootlegging is widespread, social disruption and drunken brawls have become usual happenings. The gravity of this problem is seen not only in economic drains, physical destruction of one's health but also the erosion of morale both in individuals and the society at large. Countless lives and families have been destroyed by alcohol and those who drink alcohol lose their character and respectability, shunned by both the church and society. They are considered as undesirable social elements. Problems of alcohol like addiction, broken families, economic losses, disruptive social behaviours etc are the rage.

The danger Mills expresses in *The Ao Nagas* is a reality now as the Aos have substituted the harmless rice beer with something worse in the form of alcohol. Since Nagaland is declared a dry state, the illegal sale and consumption of alcohol is not only a moral and ethical issue but also a legal concern. It also accrues economic losses as alcohol is not locally produced.

### Conclusion

Rice beer was not only a social drink but it also had a dietary function. It was ecologically sustainable and loaded with social camaraderie and values. Drinking of rice beer did not make anyone an illegal drinker in the traditional set up. But with the dawn of Christianity, absenteeism from rice beer was one of the prerequisites to becoming a Christian and all converts who slipped back to their old ways of drinking were expelled from the community. With this kind of moral licensing drinking of rice beer brought with it the accompanying feelings of guilt and sin. Thus, although "Ecological factors, to a great extent, determine what kinds of food are available within a culture," it is the moral sanction that decides where a food item or beverage belongs to and whether it can be considered as socially acceptable (Queenbala Marak, 36). The brewing of rice beer has become obsolete and its presence in parties or celebratory occasions nowadays is dislodged by the impressive foreign import liquor. Even those who make and drink do it in secrecy and this kind of surreptitious drinking behaviour becomes significant in today's context. The modern connotation of rice beer is immoral and sinful. Drinking of rice beer puts one in a moral crisis today. Although the traditional society saw free flow of rice beer there was ethics and discipline behind its drinking culture. A cup of rice beer was a carrier of socio-cultural identity and an agent that brought people together. On the other hand, alcohol is neither cultural nor occupational for the Aos. The humble rice beer has embraced its demise quietly in the

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clash between ethnic identity and Christian identity and hence, the demise of an integral aspect of the Ao social life. In giving up the ancient rice beer, the Aos have embraced an alcohol sodden society and it is worth asking the question if the demise of the humble rice beer has rather cost too much.

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