

# Role of Women in making of the Ao Naga Hunter Warrior: A Feminist Perspective

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**Abstract:** Wars and weapons are as old as History itself. But tales of warfare are replete with examples of bravery of the men folk as the 'natural' protectors of the clan and the community. In this linear narrative, the contribution of women to their clan, tribe, community, in fact to the entire socio-economic production was never discussed. This paper takes up for analysis the contribution of women of the Ao Naga tribe, (occupying the mountainous track of Naga Hills in India's North East corner.) toward moulding of a traditional Ao hunter-warrior.

**Key words:** women, Feminist, traditional, tribe, North-East, Ao Naga, head hunter, warrior.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Human Civilization was built on the labour of both men and women. However, our andro-centric assumptions about male superiority as a social constant, a universal fact of social and biological life meant that the experience of one half of humanity was subsumed under the general heading of 'mankind.' Nowhere is this as starkly reflected as in the realm of what is considered a masculine forte-wars and battles. Tales of wars and battles described by Social Scientists including Military Historians are replete with examples of bravery of the menfolk who have been depicted as the natural protectors of the clan and community. In this linear narrative, the contribution of women to their clan, tribe, community was never discussed. Women took care of the private space while the men oversaw the public space. As feminist scholars know, this description nothing, to capture the reality of women's contribution to their socio-economic reality. A feminist sensitivity, on the other hand, helps us illumine those spaces of history which traditional history and historians have conveniently ignored.

## 2. STUDY AREA:

In the context of the above, the paper takes up for discussion one such area to focus on- that of battles and fights in a specific historic and geographic context, Viz. that of the Ao Nagas residing in the Naga Hills in India's North East. The geographical location of the region, touching Bhutan, Tibet (China), Myanmar (Burma) and mainland India saw the blending of various cultural traditions in this part of the country through the decades. Several colourful tribes inhabit this region. The Ao Nagas are considered as a warrior tribe who have a glorious history warfare, which is associated with headhunting. Nagaland has a geographical area of 16,579 Sq.km approximately. It is bound by Assam in the west, Myanmar on the east, Manipur in the south and Arunachal Pradesh and part of Assam on the north. It lies between 25°6' and 27°4' northern latitudes and between 93°20' and 95°15' eastern longitudes. The State has an area of 16,579 sq. Km (which constitutes 0.5% of the country's geographical area) with a population of 19, 88,636 (0.2% of the country's population) as per 2011 Census. Nagaland is inhabited by 16 major tribes along with several sub-tribes. Almost all Ao villages fall within Mokokchung district which covers an area of 1615 Sq.km. in the North-western part of Nagaland.

## 2. OBJECTIVES:

The paper takes up for analysis, the constraining circumstances which led young Ao men to become warriors and assess the different kinds of recognition awarded to the warrior including the gender dynamics of the process.

## 3. METHODOLOGY:

A traditional research methodology does little, if anything, to remove the historical bias against representation of women. Nonetheless, the paper has used conventional secondary sources as well as the methodology of qualitative

research and oral history. However, these sources have been blended with a feminist sensitivity in order to reveal the hitherto un-discussed contribution of women who were used as psychological props by the contemporary society in the making of a warrior.

#### 4. DISCUSSION:

Raids, incursions, skirmishes, and battles were a constant in Naga life. Inter-tribal and inter-village feuds were common. Again, sometimes the disputes were quickly resolved and at other times it led to a never-ending series of strikes and counter—strikes which were often bloody. Little wonder then, warriors were integral to the life of the village. The *Nokinker* was an epithet given to the outstanding warrior of the village who was trained in all war tactics, achieved success in combats and brought human heads to the village. In order to understand the head-hunting tradition of the Nagas in general, one must place this tradition in its historical context. It was essential, given the dynamics of the time that a tribe maintain its dominance by conducting raids against enemy tribes and hunting heads. A Naga chieftain who had a sizeable display of heads or skulls was held in awe and fear by his own tribesmen and more importantly by the neighbouring tribe. A chief who was perceived as weak or one, whose tribesmen had failed to hunt heads in raids was in mortal danger from his neighbour. Needless to say, the warrior was a very important member of his ancestral society because on him rested the responsibility of hunting heads and protecting his tribe including its land and forest resources from invasions and incursions. Other than military reasons, offering of heads of those belonging to villages other than his own, was supposed to appease the spirit of the tribe's village, forest and mountain and ensure plentiful harvest.

An interesting reason why the Ao Naga went to war was to avenge the divorce and return of a married woman from her martial home in the neighbouring village. The tribe would go to war if they thought that the reason for the divorce was not valid.

While every Ao Naga village needed warriors for the village, not all the villages could produce warriors. In the absence of warriors, villages lived constantly at great risk of being invaded by other warrior villages. In some cases, the smaller villages requested the warrior village to bring them under the latter's patronage. The first missionary to the Ao Nagas Rev. Dr. Edward Winter Clark, talks about the Ao Nagas as brave warriors who gave everything, they could to protect their land and people from invaders local and foreign. It may be mentioned here that well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, head hunting was an established practice and it was not until the dawn of Christianity in the Ao land in 1872, that this practice subsided.

In the highly charged Machismo environment, it is very easy to forget the women folk of the tribe. However, if the warrior was an indispensable part of the tribe, then the efforts toward making him one was equally important and towards this end, the women played a very important role.

The young men were imparted physical training in the *Morung* or dormitory. In the Ao society, these were called the *Ariju*. The training required discipline, patience, and extreme hard work. The warrior had to be mentally and emotionally prepared to hunt heads and even die in the battle. The Ao Naga cleverly used psychological methods to inculcate the military spirit in the young men. The masculine pride was anchored on the fact that it was poised against the 'weaker' feminine attributes. In this regard, the first physiological social tool that was used to 'harden' the young men and galvanize them into the protector role was pitting their masculine trait against the supposed weaker sex. Any young man who exhibited reluctance or weakness either during training or battle was derisively called *lapi-Tasu* (effeminate) but the brave one was called *Nokzunketer/Nokinketer* (an accomplished warrior). This emotional extortion was perhaps enough in itself to motivate the young men to battle. Moreover, oral history of the tribe says that a man was more willing to give his daughter in marriage to a person who had proved his 'manhood' by bringing a fresh head and hence had become worthy to marry his daughter. The bravest of the warrior, moreover could choose his bride from among the prettiest of the girls in the village and the father would be 'honoured' to give his daughter in marriage to a brave *Nokinketer*.

The benefits that the warrior received, was both material and abstract. Among the Ao's, a warrior was honoured during his lifetime and even after his death. Some of the privileges enjoyed by the warrior of the village included the privilege to put hornbill feathers (*Ozu-mi*) in the headgear, according to the number of heads the warrior had brought to the village, special engraving in the *dao* (traditional spear) holder, additional decoration in the spears etc. Not only that, Moreover, the warrior's exploits were immortalized by the woman who composed and sang songs in their honour. Among the material benefits, was the honour of wearing the special embroidered shawl woven by the women of the village for the bravest warrior. Oral tradition has it, that with a view to encouraging and raising more warriors amongst the men, and getting rid of the enemies, the women folk of *Chungleliyimti* village, decided to design and weave a special shawl with stripes in the middle on which the symbols of skull, shield, tiger, lion etc. were embroidered. This shawl was known as *Mangko-Tepsu* and it was decreed that this cloth would be given to the heroes and warriors, who could drive away the enemies and bring their heads to the village. While the warrior went to battle, the women back home observed

certain rituals in order to ensure the success and safe return from battle. When the men were at war, the womenfolk at home had to remain 'chaste.' Moreover, she had to ensure fire burning at the hearth as if the fire burnt out, she could not bring fire from her neighbour, till the time her menfolk returned. At every meal, she had to pretend her husband was present, and although no food was put for him, she would talk to him as if was with her.

While written evidence are scanty, oral tradition point to the fact that the Naga women were themselves proficient in handling weapons. *Merangpang-Nok* or *Melem-Nok* was a *dao* (traditional sword) used by women while dancing during *Mithun* or bull sacrifice.

The world of social sciences, dominated by men, ever since their establishment, did little justice to highlight women's dynamic role in the society. The head-hunting culture begun in order to settle personal disputes, but slowly it shaped up into a form of man's game which was played in order to climb the ladders of recognition in the village.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

The Ao Nagas followed a well-established system of family, marriage and law of inheritance which was based on patriarchal principles. Ao Naga women were kept off property rights over land and their existence and well-being revolved around the welfare of the man which further meant that their own identities were, but, secondary. Having said that, one must understand that women were not mere props or passive contributors in the making of a warrior. What is important to note in conclusion is that the whole clime of masculine pride and warrior honour would have been incomplete without it being anchored on women's dynamic participation and constant support and encouragement, all to the end goal of making a warrior a *Nokinketer*.

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