

**Missionaries, ‘Savages’ and Print: Literary Traditions in Late
Nineteenth and Early Twentieth
Centuries Naga Hills**

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Abstract: *Set against the background of the colonial and missionary intervention in the Naga Hills, this paper traces the hill peoples’ experiences and interactions with change. Specifically, the paper traces the Ao Nagas’ interaction with the written word. This was a shift from their earlier practice of oral tradition. The experience had far reaching consequences, especially as the mission exercised monopoly over literacy and the selection and printing of books.*

Keywords: *Assam, Ao Nagas, Culture, Naga Hills, Missionaries, Education etc.*

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In all fields of Christian work the printed page is an invaluable ally of the worker. For the last hundred years and more in India the work of producing, publishing and distributing Christian books has occupied the attention of many consecrated men and women. Many of the missions and churches of India have established presses in order to print more efficiently and conveniently the book which their people were writing and translating.¹

Introduction

American Baptist missionaries stationed at Sibsagar (Assam) recorded the early encounter of the Ao Nagas² with the printing press in Assam in these words, “As each cold season came around hill men came in for trade and sight-seeing. Our press building, with its typesetting,

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printing and binding of books was for them the wonder of wonders”.³ Not long after, when E. W. Clark, the missionary printer at the Sibsagar Mission Press and his wife Mary Mead Clark, ascended the Naga Hills to reengage with the Nagas,⁴ their faithful ally followed suit. The arrival of the first printing press into the Naga Hills in the early 1880’s was recorded by Mary Mead Clark:

Later literary and schoolwork going apace, Mr. Clark requested that a hand printing press be sent out from Boston. A much bigger one than was expected came very near proving a black elephant on our hands. The Nagas, now eager for every evidence of their progress civilisation ward, voluntarily contributed two whole days to the tremendous task of bringing it to our hill top.⁵

What the missionaries perceived as ‘eagerness’ of the Nagas for evidence of ‘civilization’ may not have been true. However, undoubtedly the eventual impact of literacy and the introduction of print amongst the Nagas has been transformative. This paper, focusing on the Ao Nagas, critically engages with the start and impact of print culture in the Naga Hills. Although much has been written on the impact print has had on scribal cultures,⁶ its interaction with societies and people who were prior, entirely dependent on oral culture, calls for more engagement. Partly chosen as mission fields by the missionaries because of their ‘unlettered’ character,⁷ the Nagas provide an interesting field for the study of the engagement and negotiation between print and oral cultures.

This paper briefly discusses the preprint tradition of the Aos/Ao Nagas. The intention is not to have a complete engagement with the Ao oral tradition but rather to have an understanding of the backdrop against which print made its entry in the Naga Hills. Then I move to discuss the relationship between literacy and print. With both having their genesis in missionary initiatives, literacy and print are intricately linked. The early publishing history of the Naga Hills is reflective of this. I argue that this allowed the monopoly of print culture by the missionaries through the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century where the ‘civilizing’ and proselyting use of print was hardly contested.

Being ‘unlettered’

Perhaps reflecting what Stuart Blackburn terms as the “perceived superiority of scribing stories in letters”,⁸ a well-known Ao oral tradition narrates:

In the beginning, when the earth was still young and there was no sharp difference between darkness and light, man and beast lived together. During this age, according to the Aos claim there was a written script. The script was written on the hide of an animal and was hung on a wall. One day when the people were away in their fields, a dog dragged it down and ate it up. From that time onwards, the people had to commit all knowledge to memory and began transmitting the same by word of mouth to succeeding generations.⁹

The absence of a scribal culture prior to the missionary’s arrival has been made into a much defining marker of the Ao Nagas. Frequently described as having no ‘written language’, the missionaries, upon their uphill ascent to the Naga Hills were greeted by ‘unlettered’ tribes. Instead of a scribal culture, the Aos and Naga communities at large followed oral traditions,

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meaning an intricate web of myths, legends and stories that were passed down from generation to generation through word of mouth held the society together. Stories, songs and poems about their origin at *Longtrok*,¹⁰ to stories that narrates their social, religious and political orientation make up the Aos’ oral tradition.

This oral tradition of the Aos apart from being the medium through which their collective historical experiences were remembered, also acted as the medium of their ‘literary expressions’. Thus, apart from documenting stories of their origin and identity, their practice of taking head trophies, village organization and functioning, social practices and economy, it also reflected the lighter side of the Aos with merrymaking and festival songs and songs that reflects the everyday lives of the people.

An institution that was vital for the existence and functioning of the Ao oral tradition was *Ariju*, or the Morung system. With multiple functions, the *Ariju* not only served as an institution that trained young men to be protectors of the village but it also served as medium through which the young ones learnt stories, songs and poems of the Aos. Describing its position as an important transmitter of the oral tradition Temsula Ao wrote, “...it was here that the history and traditions of the tribe and the particular village was taught. However, mere acquisition of information was not enough. They were taught the correct form of address in an assembly, the right way of narrating stories, singing songs and ballads”.¹¹ Thus, reflecting different themes dealing with social life, religious believes and everyday life and personal experiences of ordinary people, these ‘literary expressions’ which formed the ‘history’ of the Aos was committed to memory and passed down orally.

Despite slight variations in their understanding of their origin and migration at *Longtrok*,¹² and the variations in the social and cultural practices amongst speakers of the various dialects, one clear feature of the Ao oral tradition was the solidarity in the usage of one dialect for its transmission. Although there were dialectal variations amongst the Aos,¹³ *Mongsen*, a dialect of the Aos, was used to narrate the Ao oral tradition.¹⁴

Thus, when the missionary and his ‘civilizing’ agents made their entry into the Naga Hills in the late nineteenth century, the ‘literary’ tradition they encountered was different from their own experience, or that which was practiced by the valley people. Identified rather as ‘savage’ and ‘strange legends’, the missionaries and gradually the Church, discouraged the Aos’ engagement with their oral tradition. Later, in the missionary’s vocabulary, it would be seen as a transition from ‘darkness’ to ‘light’ where the Aos not only transitioned from being ‘pagans’ to earnest Christians, but also exchanged their ‘orality’ for the written word. Perhaps J. P. Mills’ comment in 1926 puts this drastic transition into perspective:

Another generation and hardly a memory will remain of the stories and songs which the Aos have handed down from father to son for untold ages. What care the well-oiled youths of the Impur Mission Training School for the foolish traditions of their ignorant heathen forebears.¹⁵

Missionary, language and ‘the book’

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Accused of being ‘savages’, ‘heathen’ and ‘unlettered’, the Nagas saw the beginning of the mission work amongst them by the American Baptist missionaries. The Ao mission field, the first mission field in the Naga Hills, was set up in March 1876. It is claimed in missionary records that it was the Aos who invited them to their hills with pleas to teach their children to “talk with books”,¹⁶ meaning to teach their children to read the printed books as they saw the Assamese students being taught by the missionaries in the mission schools. It is unclear what prompted the Aos to extent this invitation to the missionaries as centuries of living in close proximity with the Assamese had not tempted them to either learn the Assamese language or to adopt their script.¹⁷ However, the picture of the Ao Nagas being drawn to the ‘civilizing’ activities of the missionaries was frequently reflected in their writing.

Reducing the Ao vernacular to writing was a natural progression for the missionaries after the start of the mission. The ‘Word of God’ had to reach the people in their own vernacular.¹⁸ On beginning their work, Mary Mead recounted that “two of the most intelligent men of the village were chosen to come to the bungalow morning by morning to talk with us, rather to permit us to pick from their mouths, or throats, it seemed, their unwritten language”.¹⁹ Rev. Rivenburg, another missionary who worked amongst the Aos also had similar experience, writing to his parents in 1885, “Every morning at 5:30 o’clock two Nagas come in to talk to us for an hour. To us they sound as if they had hot mush in their mouths. We find Mr. Clark’s dictionary helpful in finding the meanings to the words”.²⁰

In the Naga Hills, languages or rather dialects, were highly localized with variations found across different villages of a single ‘tribe’. Differences existed even within villages where different *khels* within the village spoke different dialects.²¹ This situation was found across the communities in the Naga Hills. This manifested in various forms, for example, dialectal variation went to the extent of people from the same ‘tribe’ not understanding one another, to experiencing lesser difficulty in communication while speaking distinctly different dialects.

With renewed interest in the hill tribes and with groups of these hill men frequenting the plains for trade, Clark established contacts with them and sent his Assamese assistant Godhula, along with them to visit their village in the hills.²² When Godhula accompanied these men in 1872, he was already trained in their dialect, which he picked up through a ‘Naga man’ living near Sibsagar.²³ This was the *Chungli* dialect spoken by men from Dekha Haimong village which was later reported to be spoken by ‘fifty or more sangs’. During the annual Report of the Assam Baptist Missionary Union 1876, Clark reported:

They have no written language. Sometimes fifty or more sangs speak a common language. Sometimes, but three or four sangs. The tribe to which my native preacher Godhula went has probably fifty or more sangs, which speak a common language. He only went to two or three sangs; but had pressing invitation to go to others.²⁴

When the station was finally set up at Molung village later in the same year, Clark himself learnt the dialect from two of the ‘most intelligent men’, against a payment of one rupee for eight lessons each.²⁵ This allowed the ‘mining of this unwritten language and the necessary deeper delving to unearth the real character of these new parishioners’.²⁶ The missionary would

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later brand this dialect as the 'Ao language' of the Ao tribe, which was followed by a host of printed books.

The first published book in the Ao language was the hymnbook, *Naga Hymns*, by Godhula²⁷ in 1876, which was printed from the Sibsagar Mission Press before the start of the Ao mission field. Then, from the late nineteenth century, the missionaries began to produce books on the 'Ao language' starting with the *Ao Naga Grammar* in 1893.²⁸ This was followed in 1911 by Clark's meticulously researched work *Ao Naga Dictionary*.²⁹ Arguably the most important attempt to 'fix' the Ao language, the dictionary has went through several reprints since. Thus, this *Chungli* dialect, believed to be spoken by the whole tribe, was learnt and adopted by the missionary with the intent of not only establishing verbal communication, but with the greater objective of producing books in the vernacular. Clark, who focused much of his time on literary works during his time as a missionary in the Naga Hills, translated and brought out tools to assist him and his assistants in connecting with the local people. Thus, hymn books, Primers, Catechism and school books were written and printed in the Ao vernacular.³⁰ This had subtle yet long-standing consequences because as seen in the last section, the linguistic landscape was rather different than was initially understood by Clark.

This intervention of the missionary in the selection of the print language and hence, 'the' Ao language, was made possible because of the 'unlettered' character of the Ao vernacular. This was a pattern which would be replicated with other tribal languages in the Naga Hills.³¹ The Roman script was decided upon as the script in which the Naga languages would be written. Of this decision, Clark explained:

None of the Naga tribes have written language. They have no letters or alphabet whatsoever and the first missionary has to pick up languages as best as he can and give the people in alphabet for writing and for books. After much thought the English or the Roman alphabet was chosen with the Italian sound of the vowels. After much thought the English or Roman alphabet was chosen with the Italian sound of the vowels. One new letter for a certain vowel sound was designed. With this arrangement the Ao language is phonetically written without a diacritic mark, each letter having (with only a slight deviation) one and the same sound whatever used. In this way learning to read and to spell words is easy.³²

Along with the initiative to reduce the Ao language to writing, modern institution of school was also introduced. The first school was started by Mary Mead Clark in 1878. Initially a girls' school, it was soon opened to both girls and boys. Related to the school work, toolkits in the form of the ABC book and primers were printed at the expense of the mission. As the field missionary proudly claimed in 1916, the students of this school were the first to 'read their own language'.³³ The early translated works were aimed for the new converts, not confined to, but who were mostly students of the mission schools. This was prominently the medium through which print made its en route into the Naga Hills.

A marked feature of these publications was the use of the *Chungli* Ao dialect as the print language for the Aos. Explaining the choice of *Chungli*, Mary Mead Clark wrote:

When Zungli and Mungsen (sic) converse together, each frequently, though not always, speak his own dialect. From the first Zungli has evidently been the dominant element in the Ao tribe, and only among

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the Zungli do the village offices descend in family lines. This dialect is now evidently more prevalent than Mungsen. Some words of the latter have crept into the Zungli dialect, but only very few, considering the long and intimate relationship of the two dialects. The language of the books thus far printed in Ao is Zungli...³⁴

This was a departure from the earlier language trajectory maintained by the Aos in which both *Chungli* and *Mongsen* called for equal attention, with 'poetical Mongsen' used as the carrier of the Ao oral tradition. With the introduction of a print language however, *Chungli* began to be more frequently used in official meetings and church services even in/with a *Mongsen* speaking village/public. Explaining this reordering of the dialectal dynamics of the Aos, J. P. Mills wrote:

When inspecting schools in Mongsen-speaking villages I have more than once got the boys to read portion of the Bible and shut their books, and I have then asked them to tell me what they have been reading. They will repeat it almost word for word fluently enough in Chongli, but when a request is made to explain in their own dialect the invariable answer is that "it cannot be done; it is written in Chongli and can only be explained in Chongli."³⁵

Although a hand printing press was imported, books for use in the Naga Hills were printed from the neighbouring printing presses in Assam and Calcutta and usually published by the American Baptist Mission, Impur. With the start of the 'Literary department' under Clark in 1894, literary and publishing work for the Ao Nagas was carried out more systematically. As the twentieth century dawned, the mission took credit for the publication of Ao Arithmetic Book I, Ao Arithmetic Book II, Primer in Ao Naga, First Reader in Ao Naga, Folklores of the Ao Nagas, Ao Reader (Second), An Outline Grammar of the Naga Language, The Story of Joseph, First Catechism, Second Catechism, Ao Naga Dictionary and New Testament.³⁶

Conclusion

With the printing press recognized as an 'invaluable' ally of the missionary, the introduction of print in the Naga Hills by the American Baptist missionaries appear to have been an organic process, with the gospel serving as their main reference for print. Driven by the desire to spread the gospel rather than commercial profit, Christian literature which included the Bible, journals, magazines, pamphlets and tracts were printed and distributed for free. By the early twentieth century, reports of writing and selecting literature and printing of books for the Aos were frequently sent by the field missionaries, with one writing, 'There seems to be no end of making books...'³⁷ The consumers of these printed books were mostly newly converted Christians, schooled by the missionary to 'read the Word of God'. It has been argued that in nineteenth century Northeast India, the emphasis of the missionaries was to mint 'passive readers' of the Bible and related religious books and tracts and not necessarily 'writers' who could "interrogate the missionary scripts or the master texts".³⁸ This argument is backed by the fact that throughout the missionaries' writings and reports, we find their emphasis on 'being able to read', and hardly on putting their thoughts to writings or articulation. In this context, a

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vernacular public sphere only came up in the early twentieth century when the Aos began to initiate newspapers and journals of their own.³⁹

The monopoly of the printing technology in the hands of the Christian missionaries is thus, one of the most prominent features of the early book history in the Naga Hills. With the colonial administrators entering the scene over a decade later than the missionaries, and with the Aos unable to appropriate the use of print initially, the early printing and publishing work was undertaken solely by the missionaries with an evangelical objective. Mission run schools and churches proved to be important sites that defused not only the 'good news' but also allowed interaction and familiarization of people with the written word through printed books. With no preprint taste to cater to in terms of popular literary demand, most of the work published during this early period were school primers and translated Christian centric books which ran in small publication numbers of mostly 1000-2000 copies. These text books/Christian literature, formed the main body of vernacular literature for the Aos during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Popularized in missionary's narrative as a 'renaissance in letters' for the once 'isolated', 'unlettered' and 'primitive' Ao Nagas, the Aos quickly became consumers of the 'Word of God'. The book also quickly became an artefact of 'modernity'. Perhaps encouraged by the missionaries, there came to be associated with the ability to read a certain degree of prestige so much so that people made a conscious show of it or searched for an association with it, for example, holding a book or appearing to read a book. Mary Mead Clark wrote about one such moment:

We can never tell the joy when the young men and women in our congregation began to intelligently handle the Scriptures and hymn books! What did it matter if sometimes the books were held upside down by the older ones who did not wish to be outdone; their honest pride spoke volumes. Of what account were any sacrifices for this people now glad to have us with them and eager for the printed word.⁴⁰

This acceptance and assimilation of the written word and 'the book' into the Ao society was initiated by the missionaries not only to assist in the 'civilizing' programme but more importantly to mediate the process of proselytization.

Notes & References

¹ A Glimpse of the Mission and Church Presses in India, ABFMS, Microfilm no- 3255, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti, New Delhi.

² The Nagas are an ethnic minority in the present Northeast of India, comprising of several tribes. The Ao Nagas is one of the tribes, concentrated in the present state of Nagaland.

³ Mary Mead Clark, *A Corner in India*, American Baptist Publication Society, 1907, p. 9.

⁴ Work with the Namsang Nagas was started by Miles Brownson in 1836. However, this work was given up until it was taken up again by E.W. Clark in 1876 with the start of the Ao Naga mission.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 108-109.

⁶ For example, Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800*, Verso, 1976, Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁷ Jayeeta Sharma has shown how the gospel work was more successful with similar 'unlettered' societies owing to their 'fluidness'. See, Jayeeta Sharma, 'Missionaries and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Assam: The

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Orunodoi Periodical of the American Baptist Mission', p. 270, in Robert Eric Frykenberg (ed.), *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

⁸ Stuart Blackburn, 'The Stories Stones Tell: Naga Oral Stories and Culture', eds. Micheal Oppitz, Thomas Kaiser, Alban Von Stockhausen and Marion Wettstin, *Naga Identities: Changing Local Cultures in Northeast India*, Snocek Publishers, Gent, 2008, p. 267.

⁹ Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, Heritage Publishing House, 2012, p. 8.

¹⁰ The Aos belief that their ancestors emerged from *Longtrok*, Chungliyimti, now in the Sangtam region in Nagaland. For details, see Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, Heritage Publishing House, 2012.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.10.

¹² For details, see J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, Government of Assam, 1926.

¹³ J. P. Mills in his monograph, *The Ao Nagas*, 1926, has recorded the existence variants of the Ao language that included Chongli, Mongsen, Changki, Sangpur, Yacham and Longla. Out of these only Chongli, Mongsen and Changki are in use today.

¹⁴ This was recorded by both missionaries and colonial officials like Mills.

¹⁵ J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, 1926, p. 307.

¹⁶ "Come up to our village in the hills, Sahib, and teach our children to talk with books, we will give our children that you may teach them in the new way". Quoted in C. Alva Bowers', *Under Headhunter's Eye*, American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1929, p.198.

¹⁷ Richard M. Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity Among the Nagas, 1876-1971', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1984, pp. 3-4.

¹⁸ This is an important Baptist philosophy.

¹⁹ These men were paid one rupee each for their services towards teaching the missionaries their vernacular. *A Corner in India*, p. 84.

²⁰ *The Star of the Naga Hills*, p. 48.

²¹ Mills recorded in his monograph, "A tale from Longmisa shows the misunderstanding which may arise. Tradition relates that a Chongli and a Mongsen man had a quarrel about the ownership of a clump of bamboos of the kind called in Mongsen *changpurong*. He Mongsen man kept shouting about these bamboos, and the Chongli, mishearing him, thought he was shouting *changpong*, the chongli word for a frog. Feeling himself insulted he took a fine of a pig, and from that day the Mongsen men gave up their language as a too liable to lead to expensive misunderstanding., the whole village therefore now speaks chongli, *The Ao Nagas*, p. 3.

²² The mission's position towards the hill communities underwent various changes in the nineteenth century. Initially interested in them, by the mid nineteenth century, the mission shifted their attention towards the Assam plains. However, owing to the lack of converts amongst the plains' communities, the mission yet again decided to shift their attention back to the 'savage' hill communities in the later nineteenth century.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 10.

²⁴ Report of Rev. E. W. Clark', in Bendangyabang Ao, *History of Christianity in Nagaland*, p. 50. (Originally in Sixty Third Annual Report of Assam Baptist Missionary Union, p. 38-39).

²⁵ Clark, *A Corner in India*, p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 16.

²⁷ Godhula Brown was an Assamese preacher who was approached by Clark to evangelize the Ao Nagas before the first Mission station was set up in the Naga Hills.

²⁸ Mary Mead Clark, *Ao Naga Grammar with Illustrative Phrases and Vocabulary*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1893.

²⁹ E. W. Clark, *Ao Naga Dictionary*, Printed by the Government at the Baptist Mission Press, 1911. This was written with the help of locals Idizungba, Scvbonglvmba, Kilep Alvm and Clark's wife, Mary Mead.

³⁰ The importance of bringing out books in the vernacular had long been associated with the Protestants. Specifically, while discussing the Assam mission, Rev. Burdette argued, "The use of letters is not only an approval of the study of letters but tacitly enjoins such study. The use of letters in preserving and transmitting religious truth has express Divine sanction. God Himself wrote the Ten Commandments on stone. Teaching, which men received through visions and dreams, they must commit to parchment", Paper by Rev. Burdette, Assam Mission 1887, p. 168.

³¹ For example, with the Angami Naga, although an attempt was made by John Butler, streamlining and standardizing work with the Angmai dialect, *Tenyidie*, was carried out first by Rev. C. D. King and later Rev. Rivenburg. The mission station Kohima was started in 1878, after the capture of Kohima.

³² *All is Light! All is Light!*, 2001, p. 41.

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³³ Rev. W. F. Dowd, Assam-Impur- The first Mission to the Naga Hills of Assam, 1916, ABFMS, Microfilm no-3255, NMML.

³⁴ Mary Mead Clark, *Ao Naga Grammar*, p. 1.

³⁵ Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, 1973, p. 334.

³⁶ List of Ao Naga Books Published by the American Baptist Mission, File No. 35, 1931, Nagaland State Archive.

³⁷ Experts from a letter from Rev. B. I. Anderson from Impur, Mokokchung, ABFMS, Microfilm no-3256, NMML.

³⁸ David Vumlallian Zou, The Interaction of Print Culture, Identity and Language in Northeast India, unpublished PhD thesis submitted to School of Geography, Archaeology and Paleaocology (GAP), Queen’s University Belfast, Northern Ireland, 2007, p.197.

³⁹ The first vernacular Ao newspaper, *The Ao Naga Messenger (Ao Milen)*, was started in 1932.

⁴⁰ Clark, *A Corner in India*, 1907, p. 109.