

## **THE WORK ETHIC OF A TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: A CONTEMPORARY REFLECTIVE STUDY OF THE AO NAGAS**

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An unquestionable fact of man's existence is the propensity for social relations. As the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle had said long ago that man is a social animal and he who is not a part of society must be either a god or a beast. Isolated life is not just alien to man but it is a fact that man always finds himself born into a society. Every society possesses its own culture, which determines the nature of the society and the lives of its members. Culture is broadly understood as the embodiment of the different aspects of life such as institutions, customs, traditions, beliefs, language, rituals, arts, etc.<sup>1</sup> It certainly includes the value aspect of life. E.B. Taylor had conceived of culture as standing for the beliefs, morals, customs, laws, and other capabilities and skills acquired by man as a member of society.<sup>2</sup>

Every culture thus, has its system of values, its beliefs about what is right and wrong, good and bad which are manifested in the forms of behaviors and practices of that society. These values are determined by their customs and traditions, and it is these value beliefs regarding man's actions which constitute the ethical standards of the society. The maturity and strength of a society are moreover, reflected by the kind of values a society accepts.<sup>3</sup> It is this aspect that gives a culture its uniqueness and identity. This paper attempts at bringing a reflective perspective on the ethical standards that underlie the working culture of the traditional Ao Nagas. The Aos are one of the major indigenous Naga tribes, inhabiting the state of Nagaland, North East of India. They are an ethnic group, having a distinctive culture of their own. Before colonialism and subsequent inclusion into the Union of India, the Aos, like any other Naga tribes were living an independent, self-sustaining life free from any kind of external control.<sup>4</sup>

Traditional societies essentially mean those whose ways have developed in the absence of writing and have been perpetuated by oral and behavioral traditions alone.<sup>5</sup> The traditional Ao society was in this way a non-literate society. However, what it lacked in literacy was made up for in their robust system of customary laws and oral traditions, which served as the anchor of their community in all circumstances. It defined for them what constituted a good member of the community

and how to maintain harmony within the community. Their customs and traditions contained within themselves all the subtleties that were required of in man's relations.<sup>6</sup> These encompassed their value beliefs too.

Views exist which states that philosophy cannot belong to the domain of a culture that lacks literature and that they lack a system of thought also.<sup>7</sup> Theories had been propounded which held that the people belonging to such "primitive" cultures possess an undeveloped intellect and thus questioned the rationality of the thoughts of these people.<sup>8</sup> The absence of written literature should not entail that the non-literate people were devoid of any kind of worldviews worth elaborating or discussing. This view can be seen affirmed in Paul Radin's work where he observed that philosophical thoughts and rationality are not the exclusive properties belonging to the western mind. On the other hand, he was of the view that these people belonging to the non-literate culture possessed an even truer sense of reality than the western minds.<sup>9</sup> The truth of this observation is found exemplified in the reflective study of the traditional AOs which shows that meaningful worldviews and philosophy underlies their beliefs and practices. Their culture and traditions mirror their inner philosophy of life and worldviews, both at the individual as well as the community level.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not to show that the AOs possessed some kind of unique philosophy but it is to bring into view that there is more to the life of this community than being merely seen and understood as a people regulated by customs and traditions. Historical, sociological, theological, and anthropological studies on this community are being done but philosophical reflections and writings on the beliefs and practices of the community are unexplored territories. The paper is a modest attempt to contribute to this. This study uses ideas from existing historical, sociological and cultural studies, to reflect on the philosophical- moral consideration that shape the community's approach to work.

The AO is always a community-oriented individual.<sup>11</sup> Here 'community' does not only mean a group of people living together in one place as defined in the *Illustrated Oxford Dictionary*. However, as Ferdinand Tönnies, the German sociologist had defined, it refers to the bonds existing amongst the individuals living together, which are manifested in the forms of kinship, blood relationships,

friendship, the neighborhoods, etc.<sup>12</sup> These forces would imply shared history, language, culture, and values, etc. In a traditional society, it is these bonds that act as the forces of social cohesion, create a sense of being in a distinct group, and sustain the community. The bonding of individuals leads to mutual identification of the self with the common life and purpose of the community, for which “we” is the natural expression.<sup>13</sup> The characteristic stamp of the cultural identity of the Ao society is this communalistic nature. In such a social context, members of the society acknowledge the existence of common goods and values, and these guide the actions and the thoughts of a man in his relations with others. In Ao society, their customary laws and tradition created a system of values that regulated all the activities of the individual with the community. It is in the light of this communitarian nature, that the moral considerations which guided the traditional AOs in their approach to work, can be reflected upon.

**Work Ethic:** The term ‘ethics’ originated from the Greek root word ‘*ethos*’, meaning “*character, customs, habits*”. Technically, ethics is understood to mean that area of study which is concerned with morality. In a narrower sense, ethics is also used to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group, or individual.<sup>14</sup> The term ‘morality’ itself comes from the Latin word “*mores*” meaning “customs and habits” which corresponds with the Greek word ‘*ethos*’.<sup>15</sup> Morality means the beliefs, social rules, norms about what is good, bad, right, and wrong regarding conduct as well as the character of persons. Thus, though morality is the subject matter of ethics, these two terms are often used interchangeably. Ethics can be thus understood as the moral standards or rules of conduct that guide human individuals or groups in their relations to one another and society. The term ‘traditional ethic’ is used here to refer to the notions of morality concerning their works, as held by the traditional Ao people. Since the time Max Weber first coined the word ‘work ethic’, the term has undergone different conceptions. However, work ethic is commonly understood as that which recognizes virtues such as hard work, honesty, perseverance, integrity, as the core values in a person's approach to his work. These values imply that work ethic requires a person to have a degree of self-sacrifice or dedicating oneself to the work. It is a belief that work and diligence have a moral

benefit and an inherent ability, virtue, or value to strengthen character and individual abilities.<sup>16</sup>

More precisely, work ethic refers to a set of values that focus on the importance of the desire to work hard. It means perceiving work as a desirable activity and considered as a mark of good character.<sup>17</sup> Work ethic means that work is valued as the means to some end, it is bound up with the attainment of some state of affairs which is valued.<sup>18</sup> The term 'work ethic' is a western modern construct that is conceived to understand and gauge the working culture of different areas of man's activities. The preliterate non-western culture, such as the traditional Ao society never had such formal conception of work ethic as found in modern western culture. But this does not mean that traditional Ao society lacked this moral or ethical approach towards their work. The purpose of ethics is to regulate the behavior of individuals so that the welfare of the group is fostered.<sup>19</sup> This purpose can be seen in the working culture of the Aos.

**Work culture:** Culture is the result of beliefs, values, behaviors, habits, experiences, etc. It may be understood as the way of behavior and living which is created when a group of people comes to accept certain ways of living and doing things. Culture is the environment in which an individual always finds himself doing things as well as interacting with others. How a person works, the attitudes he possesses towards doing things then are greatly influenced by the culture in which he finds himself. It may be stated that work is the culture and identity of the Aos. The Aos always had a healthy, positive attitude towards work, because it was understood that work is what sustains the life of a human being on earth; until and unless one engages in work, survival is impossible. He is described as industrious and hard-working.<sup>20</sup> As traditional communities, their lives revolved around their cultivation activities. Knowing that his livelihood depended on this, he worked hard, laziness was considered as a vice and always cautioned against in the community. The propensity to work hard was always viewed as a desirable trait in the character of an Ao and thus a virtue to be possessed. Begging out of laziness or due to some other reasons was completely unknown to the Aos.<sup>21</sup> They survived by their hard work.<sup>22</sup> The attitude of the Aos towards their work was determined by their customs and traditions. More precisely, it is aroused from the underlying philosophy of a community-oriented society according to which the

upliftment, welfare, and harmony of the community are of utmost importance. Their customs and traditions served as the bulwark from any disintegrating elements to this communal spirit.

Apart from the fact that the Aos were hardworking people, one striking feature of their work culture is community work, which takes two forms – compulsory community work and voluntary works. A study of this feature reveals that these seemingly ordinary normal manners of the whole community coming together to work is an expression of a deeper thought process, that constitutes their worldview. For the Aos, the village is the primary unit within which they existed. It is the largest unit bound together by social, religious, and political ties, which act as a unit in all things.<sup>23</sup> An individual possesses an identity only in so far as he belongs to a village and participates in all the activities of the village. All social and domestic life was regulated by a set of well-articulated customs and traditions.<sup>24</sup> The social community context was defined by this belongingness to a village. The village thus represents the highest degree of social cohesion.<sup>25</sup> Belonging to the village entails belonging to the larger entity of the Ao community. This concept of the larger entity of community is termed “*loktiliba*” which means the “*way of the people*”. The traditions and norms that entail from this term guided and determined all the actions of an Ao. How a man contributes to this entity determined his position and identity in society.<sup>26</sup>

All such voluntary works come under the term known as “*naja*”, which means ‘*free labour*’. Such practices are the result of the Aos possessing a strong sense of oneness, their duties towards each other, and helping one another in times of need.<sup>29</sup> This work culture of the Aos emanating from their adherence to the customary laws and traditions is a reflection of the people’s wisdom and understanding about humanity and one’s place in the whole circle of life. It brings out the communal dimension of ethics that no man is an island – a man is never alone but he is a part of the whole, a part whose identity can only be found with the community to which he belongs, which calls for reciprocity, interrelatedness, and harmony. In a communitarian context the rightness, goodness of actions, the character is determined by the ability to contribute to the common welfare, upliftment, and harmony of the community. A person is considered a person only within the context of his

participation in the community and thus his relation to the 'other' in the community. This belief is brought out in the form of giving mutual help, caring, and sharing in the community. These ethical considerations are found mirrored in their approach to work.

This deep respect and regard for the well-being of the community guided the Ao man in all his work and activities. His sense of responsibility to help, care, and contribute to the community was a recognition of the truth of the interrelatedness which exists between the larger entity of the community and the individual. The community was not a sum of atomic individuals who happened to come and live together. But the traditional Ao community was a living community where there was a close relationship among the people on account of their common history, culture, traditions, values, beliefs, etc. It can be characterized as an organic community where there is the reciprocity of awareness and this was evident in all their actions and behaviors.<sup>31</sup>

**Ethical Elements in the Ao work culture:** Reflections on the Ao work culture show the ethical elements which guided the lives and actions of the traditional people. First and foremost, the moral consideration in their approach to work was altruistic in temperament. Altruism is understood as the principle of conduct that regards the good of others as the end of moral action.<sup>32</sup> The communalistic spirit which prevailed, discouraged any kind of egoistic outlook in the thinking and activities of the individuals. W.C. Smith observed that in such homogeneous communities, there was little room for individualistic tendencies.<sup>33</sup> Working for the greater good always prevailed. The morality of actions and the character of an Ao were judged based on the degree to which an action or the person contributed to the greater good, the well-being of the community. Insensitivity to the needs and sufferings of others was always looked upon as repugnant. Since the underlying objective was focused on bringing about the greatest good for the community, the common welfare at all times, it may be stated that their moral outlook was utilitarian.

Another important ethical element that stands out is that their work culture was guided by the moral principle of duty. The moral principle of duty in the sense that to live and practice as laid down by their customs and traditions at all times,

because it is the right thing to do and to live otherwise was to bring disruption and disharmony to the life of the community. The customary nature of the society itself mandates a morality that stresses the duty to others, to the community. It may be maintained here that this sense of duty, of responsibility, is induced by the consciousness of needs and not of rights. The communitarian work values of cooperation, mutual help, solidarity, compassion arises due to the awareness and the acceptance that these are necessary to be exemplified in one's actions because these uphold the social structure, which means continuity of life for the community. This leads to certain duties or responsibilities to be discharged towards others in need. The values of communitarian society thus impose the duties on the individuals.

Such moral elements in the Ao work culture show that being pre-literate society what they lacked in well-formulated written principles, they were able to express in their lives and actions. The customs and traditions which were the guiding force in their activities were not some simple laws and regulations created by their pre-literate minds to keep their community intact but it was a reflection of inherent awareness and knowledge of morality, a recognition of the worth of fellow human beings, the interconnectedness that exists among men. The acknowledgment of these moral values is found fully extended to their working culture which constituted their work ethic.

**A contemporary overview:** As a customary society, the AOs continues to exist and function regulated by their customary laws and traditions, even though it comes under the larger administration of the Indian Government. This is because the Indian Constitution had recognized the importance of traditional institutions, laws, and customs of the Nagas in general as specifically important to their lives, and therefore, these are protected by a special amendment of the Indian Constitution.<sup>34</sup>As it is already shown that the AOs possessed well-established strong conceptions of what is right and wrong, good and bad, which were expressed in different forms including their approach to work. Adherence to these beliefs provided social cohesion and maintained societal relatedness in the community. In contemporary times this adherence to customs and traditions in one's approach to work still prevails to a considerable degree but the threat of a slow, gradual disappearance of these traditional values in one's approach to work is an ever-present reality. Certain factors

like westernization, rapid urbanization, the impact of technology both at the individual as well as at the social level are playing a major role in causing a slow death of the communalistic spirit which is the foundation of the Ao society. In today's generation, the value of hard work is conspicuous by its absence. The impact of western culture in different forms has brought about a considerable change in people's attitude and outlook, bringing about a more individualistic mindset, an attitude that does not concur well with the communal values. This is manifested in the form of selfish, individualistic, and often oppressive ways of doing things to carry forward one's agenda.

Corruption is another factor that is threatening the work values that upheld the traditional way of working. The spirit of contributing towards common welfare or upliftment of common wellbeing seems to be spiraling downwards every day. Individuals working with the idea of common welfare are rather looked upon as being idealistic and impractical. Corruption is defraying the fabric of the Ao society at different levels and this is basically due to the selfishness, greed, materialistic mindset, and a loss of a sense of community welfare that so characterized the traditional society. Moral values like honesty, integrity, concern for the needs, and the well-being of the 'other' which were the values that guided the traditional Aos, have been thrown to the winds. The offices of public servants, political as well as civil administration, and other social services are looked upon, desired after because these are seen as good avenues to partake the 'greater national or society cake'. Fortifying oneself, one's position for the future seems to be the sole objective.

In traditional society, youngsters both male as well as female were trained and inculcated with different work values starting from showing respect to elders to doing different kinds of manual work, which prepared them for their future citizenship in their respective villages and community.<sup>35</sup> Today, respect for elders is a value becoming rarer by the day, young people feel rather ashamed to be seen doing manual work, so they avoid it and would also rather pay the fines imposed for not participating in community work. Many social problems are created because individuals are on the lookout for earning easy money without hard work and also without learning any skills. The concept of 'we' 'ours' are gradually replaced by the



concept of 'me' 'mine', the signs of individualism seeping into the fabric of the society.

Indeed, the culture of a society is not static. The changing times are bound to leave their marks and the old is bound to give way to the new in many respects. But what is new, modern and contemporary do not always mean blessings, because certain factors may prove to be detrimental to the very structure of a society, eroding the foundations on which the culture of the society stands. It is thus imperative on the part of the people, the community to make all efforts to hold on to and keep those aspects of their traditions which are proved to be good for the society, which will help the community to grow, move forward, and exists as a society with strong ethical moorings. The traditional work ethic of the AOs is one such aspect of their culture which has sustained their community. Their customs and traditions which guided them in their work are the monuments of history, constructed out of human action, wisdom, and experience. It reflects the maturity, intellectual exercise, and strength of society.<sup>36</sup> It exhibits values that are not just specific to this community alone but are acknowledged and extolled universally. The work values speak to the purpose and needs of all human beings by belonging to the community of mankind. The true measure of a society ultimately must not be how modernized or technologically advanced it is, but how strong are their moral and ethical values and how well a society allows itself to be guided by such values. The contemporary AO society to retain its rightful place amid changing times, as an ethical society true to its tradition, must look back to revive the good ethical elements and embrace them to strengthen the society.

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34. Bendangkokba., *Op. cit*, p.2.
35. In traditional Ao society, there was the *Ariju* and the *Tsuki* which were traditional institutions, where young boys above a certain age and young girls respectively, learned various art and skills which prepared them to be responsible members of the community.
36. Imchen, Panger., *Op. cit*, p.105.