

---

## Rewriting Naga Culture: A New Historical study of Temsula Ao's poetry

---

Rebeka Debbarma\*

Temsula Ao was a distinguished author hailing from Nagaland, located in the northeastern part of India. She was a member of the Ao-Naga community, a prominent Naga tribe residing in Nagaland. Ao was born on October 25, 1945, in the small town of Jorhat in Assam, and passed away on October 9, 2022, in Dimapur, Nagaland. Ao held a professorship at Northeastern Hill University in Shillong and served as the Director of the Northeast Zone Cultural Centre for five years (1992-1997) on deputation. Her poetic oeuvre comprises six books. Additionally, she has authored three collections of short stories and a memoir. Her extensive work on Naga culture and oral traditions culminated in the publication of *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*. Ao's literary contributions, particularly regarding the Northeast and Nagaland, have been widely recognized, earning her the Padma Shri in 2007 and other awards such as the Governor's Gold Medal, Sahitya Akademi Award, and Kusumagraj National Literature Award.

Ao's poems intricately weave Naga heritage and culture, offering profound explorations of identity, tradition, and societal transformation in contemporary India. Her writings serve as a record of the multifaceted realities of Naga life, which are deeply rooted in the region's natural landscape and cultural nuances. Her poems serve as potent instruments for preserving and promoting Naga culture, encapsulating the essence of folklore, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems passed down through generations.

Ao's interest in studying Naga culture was primarily ignited following her interactions with Native Americans at the University of Minnesota. These individuals endeavored to reclaim their native language, a consequence of colonization and modernization. She empathized with the distress of losing one's roots, language, and culture, and perceived that the situation of the Nagas might soon parallel that of Native Americans. Upon her return, she conducted ethnographic research on the Ao-Naga tribe. Ao's fascination with Naga culture is evident in her poetry, which predominantly draws inspiration from the oral traditions of the Nagas, as well as the landscapes and social issues of Nagaland.

### Cultural Poetics/New Historicism

Interest in the study of Culture in Literature began with Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism in the 1980s. New Historicism revived the study of society and culture, which had been abandoned by practitioners of New Criticism. It is multidisciplinary in nature. It deconstructs the literary canon and believes that a work of literature should be studied in the context of society. Literature is believed to be a ground for political

---

\* Assistant Professor and Research Scholar in the Department of English, Maharaja Bir Bikram University, Agartala, Tripura.

Corresponding Author Email: rebekadebbarma22@gmail.com

and social discourse. “In the process of problematizing the inextricable link between literary discourse and other master narratives, new historicism has made the relation between text and society its predominant concern.” (Williams 116)

New Historicism is a blend of theories from various fields, including literary studies, the social sciences, and anthropology. Foucault’s discourse theories and Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” have greatly influenced their theories. According to Foucault, all literary works are grounds for social and political discourse. A work of literature is consciously created, keeping an agenda in mind or due to the cultural forces that influence one. Geertz’s theory emphasizes that ethnography is interpretive and narrative, like a work of literature. By adopting the literary theory of symbolism in ethnographic studies, Geertz blurred the boundaries between literature and anthropology. New historicists believe that a work of art is related to the historical context, and in the process of writing, a writer also takes part in the making of history. New Historicism attempts “to analyse the social and cultural processes by which the lives and cultures of whole sections and classes of people were neglected and marginalised.” (Brannigan 35)

### **Rewriting Cultural History**

British writers often depicted the Nagas as ‘savages’ and ‘uncivilized’ tribes, while in mainland India, they were typically viewed as subaltern and only garnered attention during times of conflict. Ao seeks to convey the truth about her culture and the rich traditions of the Nagas. Through her poetry, she endeavors to rewrite the history of the Nagas, a culture that has long been overlooked, misunderstood, and misrepresented. New Historicist and Marxist critics emphasize the importance of representation since New Historicism explores not just literary works but also a variety of other writings, including oral traditions, as topics for analysis, thus positioning the portrayal of Nagas as a matter of political significance.

New Historicists believe that not only does history influence Literature, but Literature also influences history. Therefore, this can be stated as a reciprocal process. Literature is a product of culture, and the ideologies of culture and society are visible in the writings of these authors. The author is influenced by the socio-political and economic aspects of his/her society, which simultaneously influence the ideologies of their culture.

Nagaland is located in the hilly areas of Northeast India, a term given by the British, who were not very interested in directly colonizing these areas as they viewed them as a liability with very little productivity. It is believed that the Nagas formed the group as old as 300 BCE, according to the Naga Institute of Arts and Culture. They came into contact with the British during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before the arrival of the British, the Nagas practiced an animist belief system. They lived in close connection with nature, worshipped natural elements, and believed in the existence of souls. The Nagas are divided into many clans and sub-clans, each with its own dialect. Among these tribal groups, the Ao-Nagas, in particular, were very proud of their cultures and traditions, since their ancestors had left them with a well-developed tradition and heritage. They practiced local self-governance, and the governing body was called “Putu menden.” British authors like V. Elwin, J.S. Mill and Robert Reid appreciated the democratic spirit and political wisdom of the early Nagas, while the early British authors like A. Makenzie and Hutton Robinson considered the Nagas as uncivilised and barbaric by using terms like ‘savage’, ‘uncultured’ and ‘semi-civilised’, probably due to the headhunting tradition

of the Nagas.”(Singh 2008, 23) The culture, tradition and ideologies of their community and society were mostly transferred to the next generation in the oral form since they did not possess a written script.

British imperial policies towards the Northeast frontier were predominantly evaluated through an economic lens, mirroring the colonial approach implemented in other regions. (Pou 2018, 110) They needed to use the resources and establish road connectivity from Assam to Manipur, but they faced resistance from the Nagas. Therefore, to be accessible to these tribes, whom they considered ‘barbaric’ and ‘wild’, it was deemed necessary to civilize them first. Christian missionaries played an important role in curbing the hostility by starting the major work of proselytization, but they too saw the Nagas as uncivilized and ‘hideously wild’ with ‘ugly visages’ and ‘tattooed in a most frightful manner,’ as evidenced in their letters (Elwin 1969, 515). Accordingly, Pou (2018) argues that “it becomes obvious then that the administrators were partnering with the missionaries in the project of modernizing the natives.” (66).

The imposition of British colonial rule and the arrival of Christian missionaries introduced a new set of social, political, and cultural values that supplanted pre-existing systems. The introduction of Christianity to the Naga people, while incorporating new elements, simultaneously undermined their traditional cultural identity and value. This transformation disrupted the Naga’s religious and cultural practices, posing a threat to their family structures, social morals, and the cultural-religious significance they had previously upheld, all in the name of modernization.

Christianity made a deep dent in the Naga society and tried its level best to erode the customary practices of the Nagas, making them increasingly more and more responsive to the new set of social organizations and religious beliefs. The new religion (Christianity) asked the Naga believers to part with their old culture and follow the new European or American Culture in almost all aspects of life. (Singh 69)

Ao realised that the Nagas were gradually losing their oral tradition to oblivion. She laments that the rich culture and tradition of the Nagas are now, but a thing of the past in the poem *History*,

*These songs  
From the other life  
Long lay mute  
In the confines  
Of my restive mind  
Unrelenting in their urging  
For new vocabulary  
To redraft history (Ao 239)*

She is filled with the urge to rewrite her cultural history, which now resides only in her memory. Christianity completely shunned the practices of the old religion, and anything related to culture and rituals, which the missionaries failed to understand. Along with that, ways of life were altered with the seepage of modernity.

... It heightened my awareness of the vulnerability of all Indigenous cultures in the face of rapid modernization and other relative forces. It also taught me

to look at one's culture with a fresh insight and greater appreciation. Above all, it created in me a sense of urgency to 'learn' more of my culture before time caused any more diffusion and loss of the lore. (Ao viii)

Through her writings, she attempted to revive the old traditions of the Ao-Nagas. She conducted extensive ethnographic research on the Ao-Naga Oral Tradition and collected stories, tales, songs, and legends. Ethnographic poems consisting of mythologies, legends, and other stories became an accompanying collection called *Songs from Other Life*.

Even when writing about the past, the present was always in her mind, and she constantly moved between the past and present. She views the past through the lens of her current condition. While being born and raised in a Christian family and living closely with the missionaries, it must have been a difficult task to connect with the things of the past, as she had non-Christian ancestors. Ao acknowledges that she is far removed from the culture about which she writes. In the preface of the book *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, she mentions that "even as a native speaker of the Ao-Naga language, my knowledge about my own culture was limited and peripheral. This was so because I represent the so-called 'educated, urban' fringe of the people." (Ao ix) Ao carefully selects customs and traditions to revive that suit the contemporary context and assert Naga identity.

Traditions may be constructions, selections, or interventions, but they are not just constructions. However, not all cultural phenomena serve this purpose. We should ask what kinds of "traditions" are selected for revival and why. And for what reasons? Traditions worthy of revival are cultural phenomena with ideological value in identity negotiations. (Siikala 142)

The Aos believe that their forebears originated from the depths of the earth, taking the form of stones. "The ancestors of the tribes came out of the earth at 'Lungterok' which means 'six stones,' that was laid at the top of a spur on the right bank of the Dikhu river." (Tsuren 137) Among these stones, three were male and the other three were female. The creation myth is beautifully captured in the poem *Stone-people from Lungterok*. This origin story is significant because it clearly identifies the three main Ao clans and highlights the ongoing practice of exogamous marriage within the Ao culture.

*The six stones  
Where the progenitors  
And forebears  
Of the stone-people  
Were born  
Out of the womb  
Of the earth. (Ao 109)*

The Ao-Naga people held a belief in the soul's existence and its continuation after death. The poem "*Soul-Bird*" delves into the metamorphosis of a soul into a bird, whereas "*Nowhere Boatman*" explores the idea that a deceased soul must provide coins

to a boatman to traverse from the world of the living to the afterlife. This notion mirrors the Greek myth of Charon, the ferryman. These poems offer insights into the traditional belief systems, cultural viewpoints, and lifestyle practices of the Ao-Naga society.

*Stone-people,  
The worshippers  
Of unknown, unseen Spirits  
Of trees and forests,  
Believers of soul  
And its varied forms,  
its sojourn here  
And passage across the water  
into the hereafter. (110)*

Ao perceives it as her responsibility to assume the role of the Old Storyteller, thereby perpetuating the oral tradition by recounting the songs and tales of her ancestors. The decline of oral tradition is directly linked to the erosion of a distinct Naga identity, as oral literature serves as a repository of the Nagas' social and cultural values. Following the advent of Christianization, traditional religious and cultural practices were prohibited, leading to the adoption of Western religious practices. This transition significantly transformed their culture, resulting in a hybrid and ambiguous identity for the group. Ao feels a sense of rootlessness in *The Old Story-Teller*,

*Grandfather constantly warned  
That forgetting the stories  
Would be catastrophic  
We could lose our history,  
Territory, and most certainly  
Our intrinsic identity. (241)*

The colonization was not only of culture and religion but also of knowledge. All indigenous knowledge was considered worthless and marginalized after the written language was introduced. English became the main mode of education, and the younger generation started disregarding the old ways and completely moved away from the previous culture. She writes,

*My own grandsons dismiss  
Our stories as ancient gibberish  
From the dark ages, outmoded  
In the present times and ask  
Who needs rambling stories  
When will books do just fine? (241)*

Oral Literature is considered primitive, dark, and evil. The oral tradition was represented as evil and linked to ‘demon worship.’ (Clark 138) All kinds of traditional activities needed to be shunned, which was a part of ‘a religious and social reform.’ Because of Christianity, the new converts were afraid to practice their old culture and traditions, which they considered dark and associated with evil. On the other hand, modern education instilled in the youth the so-called ‘civilization’, which destroyed the age-old practices. The younger generations did not find any interest or reason to learn about Oral Traditions. After their encounter with white people, they were taught not to look back at their traditions and to imbibe modernity into their lives.

*We stifled our natural articulations  
Turned away from our ancestral gods  
And abandoned accustomed rituals  
Beguiled by the promise of a new heaven  
We borrowed their minds  
Aped their manners  
Adopted their gods  
and became perfect mimics. (Ao 297)*

Furthermore, after the British left India in 1947, the situation worsened for the Nagas. They did not want to be part of India and launched a resistance movement. To curb violence, the Indian Government introduced various forms of oppressive laws, and the most draconian act was the implementation of the Armed Forces (Special) Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958, which was deployed in disturbed areas as declared by the Center. The plight of the Nagas worsened since this land, once peaceful, was now disturbed by the sounds of guns, violence, and fear in the minds of its people.

*The old regime has given way  
And a new order  
Has overtaken the habitat  
Grinning on children's faces  
Painted with psychopathic stripes  
The new denizens dressed like trees  
Now infest the terrain.  
They swagger in these newfound havens  
Of unspecified dreams.  
And armed with the sceptres  
Of their unidentified kingdoms  
They dispense death and desolation to the world. (233)*

This created further distrust and distancing between the Nagas and the Indian nation, deepening the fissure. The seeds of discord were sown when Indian authorities

failed to understand the Nagas' desire for autonomy after independence (Daimari 4). Ao mentions that the 'old regime' of colonization has given way to a 'new order' of neo-colonialism. The absolute power given to army officials under the AFSPA to shoot or arrest on mere suspicion gave them the absolute authority indicated by the symbolic use of the word 'scepters,' which has often caused innocent people of the region to lose their lives. She has captured all these social realities, pain, and despair of the common people of Nagaland through her writing.

The poem, *The Epitaph*, is about the British War Cemetery in Kohima, Nagaland. This war cemetery is a reminder of the battles fought during the Second World War and contains the names of martyred British soldiers. Ao emphasizes the futility of war and violence and laments the lives of the young soldiers who are now lying on some 'alien hill-side.'

*So do not go away  
Thinking of glory  
Or of patriotic duty,  
Think of the wasted tomorrows  
Buried beneath the stone slabs (Ao 234)*

The use of the present tense in the above lines indicates a similar plea, probably to the Naga youths who joined the resistance groups for the sake of 'glory' or 'patriotic duty,' to shun violence. Further, this poem also emphasizes man's unending ambition to conquer at the expense of the loss of thousands of lives.

*Maudlin lines  
To mark the end of lives  
Dragged over thousands of miles  
By an empire's relentless run  
To out-pace the sun. (234)*

Her poetry casts a spotlight on the political turmoil besetting Nagaland, where violence and terror have become as pervasive as a disease. Many of her compositions express sorrow for the lost splendor of Nagaland, which is now reduced to a mere shadow of its former glory. Furthermore, she delves into the themes of corruption and materialism that have emerged with the rise of the capitalist class.

In *The Strange Place*, Ao writes about colonization, cultural hegemony, and the materialistic world. She wonders at the strangeness of the world where 'people are exiled in their own land', divided into 'tribal enclaves' and "armaments become national policies.' People have become insensitive and are 'imprisoned in their own minds.' (13)

Ao's poetry critiques colonialism, political machinations, and corruption within Naga society. In her poem "*Lament for Earth*," she frequently draws parallels between the landscape of Nagaland and a woman who has been dishonoured. Alas for the forest

*Which now lies silent*

*Stunned and stumped  
With the evidence  
Of her rape. (42)*

She expressed concern about the exploitation of natural resources under the guise of development in the era of capitalism. She laments the degradation of a society that once respected and harmonized with nature, now devastated by the materialistic greed of certain individuals. Modernization, a byproduct of colonization, has significantly eroded the traditional Naga way of life. In the past, the Nagas lived with deep respect for nature, ensuring the protection of the hills, forests, and animals. However, the new system has severed the spiritual bond the Nagas once had with nature, leading to its exploitation. In her poem “*The Bald Giant*,” she mourns deforestation and neglect of nature, using it as a metaphor for nature itself. Once, nature enveloped the earth with its lush green trees and vegetation, “I remember a time/ When he was not so/ He looked gorgeous then.”(175) but now it stands as distorted and barren.

*All that is now gone  
All of him is brown  
From base to crown  
And his sides are furrowed  
Where the logs had rolled  
Once I thought him friendly  
But now he looks menacing (176)*

Literature, as a product of society, is a place where social, political, and economic discourses take place. Therefore, there is a relationship between text and context. Ao’s writings are about the constant struggle of the common man in Nagaland amid violence and insurgencies. Her writings, including poems, short stories, novels, and essays, have always addressed the social and political issues of her community. Ao’s poems are a mixture of personal and communal poems. She provides a realistic portrayal of the social realities of the Naga people, giving voice to their issues. Pou (2018) asserts that “they are a powerful recreation of the rich cultural heritage, while at the same time acting as commentators on the social ills of the present day. (54)

### **Conclusion**

Ao contributes to the discourse by discussing social, political, and economic problems. Ao writes back because she calls it her ‘racial duty’ to rekindle the old rich oral traditions of her community. After all, therein lies the identity of the Nagas.

Her works have elicited substantial interest among readers as they reveal an alternative perspective on Naga life, particularly the less frequently discussed aspects of everyday existence. This has brought about significant changes in the cultural and social aspects of Naga society. Ao’s writings are a response to the context, and the text engages in various ‘discourses’ related to the social, political, and economic. This underscores the power of literature to document simple and ordinary individual experiences of the episodic past that may not be adequately captured by historical

accounts.

In the process of rewriting the past and engaging with Naga history, she created history and had a significant impact on the evolution of Naga writings in English. Temsula Ao's name has been forever engraved in history as the pioneer in the Northeast and Naga Literature, particularly, having revived the oral tradition of the Nagas and integrated it into the written culture. Furthermore, her works sparked a resurgence in the rich folk culture of Northeast India and transformed the literary canon with a new genre of writing specific to this region.

### References

1. Ao, Temsula. 2013. *Book of Songs*. Heritage Publishing House.
2. 2017. *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*. Heritage Publishing House.
3. Brannigan, John. 1998. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. Macmillan Press Ltd.
4. Clark, Mead. 1907. *A Corner in India*. American Baptist Publication Society.
5. Daimari, Anjali. 2022. "Internal Instabilities: Nationalism in the context of Nagaland with reference to select novels." *Rupkatha Journal* 14, no.2: 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne03>
7. Elizabeth, Vizovono, and Sentinaro Tsuren. 2017. *Insider Perspectives: Critical Essays on Literature from Nagaland*, Barkweaver Publications.
8. Elwin, Verrier. 1969. *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford University Press.
- Pou, K B Veio. 2018. *Literary Cultures of India's Northeast: Naga Writings in English*. Heritage Publishing House.
9. Siikala, Anna-Leena. 1999. "The Mythic Narratives: Authority of Tradition." *Folklore and Discourse*, edited by Jawaharlal Handoo and Anna-Leena Siikala. Zooni Publications.
10. Singh, Chandrika. 2008. *The Naga Society*. Manas Publications.
11. Williams, Mukesh. 2011. "New historicism and literary studies." *N,,Yè²È ÒŠÆ–* 27: 115-144: [https://soka.repo.nii.ac.jp/record/38783/filesippankyoikuburonsyu\\_0\\_27\\_5.pdf](https://soka.repo.nii.ac.jp/record/38783/filesippankyoikuburonsyu_0_27_5.pdf)