

INTEGRATING 'MODERN' VALUES: GLIMPSES INTO TWENTIETH CENTURY NAGA HILLS THROUGH A NEWSPAPER

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Abstract

This study examines the significant social and cultural changes experienced by the Ao Nagas during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a period marked by the establishment of colonial rule and the arrival of the American Baptist Mission. Beginning in 1872, the Ao Nagas were the first Naga tribe to be consistently evangelized by the American Baptists, leading to a period of cultural transition for the local communities. Focusing on the role of education as a means of adaptation, this study explores the concerns of the emerging literate class, educated primarily in mission schools, as they engaged with modernity. Through an analysis of Ao Milen, the first newspaper in the Ao vernacular, the study traces the issues prioritized by this new literate class, examining the values they debated and negotiated in print. By exploring the content of the newspaper, the study sheds light on how the Ao Nagas navigated this transformative period, revealing insights into their evolving identity and engagement with the changing world around them. In this context, I show how 'modern' values were successfully integrated into local practices.

Keywords: Naga Hills, Ao Nagas, missionaries, education, literate class, public sphere.

The Naga Hills witnessed many changes in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The nineteenth century saw not only the establishment of the colonial government, but the American Baptist Mission also began their work amongst the communities of the Naga

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Hills. This meant that local communities were navigating a period of significant social and cultural transition during the twentieth century. It is against this backdrop that I situate this study, focusing on the Ao Nagas, the first Naga tribe to be consistently evangelised by the American Baptist Mission, beginning from 1872.

Using the locals' experience of education as the entry point, I attempt to trace their concerns as they navigated these changes. As the twentieth century dawned, an emergent literate class, primarily educated in mission schools, played a pivotal role in shaping the emerging public sphere, with much of their discourse focused on adapting to the changing times. Engaging with the first newspaper in the Ao vernacular, *Ao Milen*, I trace these concerns. In this context, the launch and continued publication of the newspaper shed light on the immediate concerns of the twentieth-century literate class. What issues did they write about? What values did they prioritize and negotiate in print? And what does this reveal about the Aos, who were navigating this period of transition?

Building a literate class

In the 1830s, two American Baptist missionaries, invited by Captain Francis Jenkins, arrived in Sadiya, Assam. This was a time when the region was seen as a strategic frontier for missionary work. The initial motivation for this mission was twofold: Captain Jenkins and other British officials believed it was necessary to 'civilize' the hill tribes of the area, especially the Nagas, who were notorious for raiding the plains. At the same time, the American Baptist Mission Board was eager to expand its reach into previously untouched areas, with Assam being seen as an ideal location due to its ethnic diversity and its proximity to their Burmese mission. However, a more pressing reason for their interest in Assam was the possibility of finding routes into China (Gammell, 1850, p. 212).

The American Baptist Mission established its first outpost in Sadiya in 1836. Soon after, another station was set up in Jaipur, one of the principal posts of the East India Company in the North East frontier, to focus on the Singphos and Nagas, who had caught the attention of British residents. However, both Sadiya and Jaipur were short-lived as mission stations, primarily due to the missionaries' inability to convert the locals. In 1838, Reverend Miles Bronson attempted to evangelize the Nagas of Namsang, a hill area near Jaipur, but this venture only lasted about eight months before it was abandoned (Sword, 1992, 105).

The shift in focus from these 'tribal' groups to the Assamese people

is well documented in missionary records, with the missionaries citing several obstacles. One major challenge was the constant attacks on the mission stations by insurgent groups, but another significant barrier was the vast linguistic diversity in the region (Gammell, 1850, pp.217-222). The missionaries found it difficult to communicate effectively with the numerous tribal communities, which required learning new languages. Consequently, by the 1840s, the mission's attention turned to the Assamese, who were considered more 'civilized' and had a written language.

This shift was part of a broader Protestant evangelical strategy that emphasized education and literacy as central to spreading Christianity. The missionaries believed that by teaching reading and providing Christian texts in the vernacular, they could 'enlighten' the population. This mission work was often carried out through print and education, with Oliver Cutter, one of the two missionaries who initiated the Assam mission, playing a key role in the translation and printing of religious texts. Notably, Miles Bronson, the missionary working alongside Cutter, worked on transcribing the Naga languages, starting with the Nocte Nagas of Namsang (Gammell, 1850, p. 214; Thomas, 2016, p. 18). He also worked to translate the Bible into Assamese and other local languages.

Despite the missionaries' efforts, they faced significant resistance. The people in Assam strongly opposed the mission, viewing Christianity as a threat to their religious practices (Gammell, 1850, pp. 222-223). Additionally, the Assamese, who had their own long-established tradition of writing, appropriated the printing press to promote their own cultural revival rather than the missionaries' religious message. This further hindered the spread of Christianity.

By the late 1860s, the missionaries began to revisit their focus on the Naga tribes, motivated by reports from missionaries in Burma who had found success in converting the Chins, a group speculated to be closely related to the Nagas. Dr Edward Winter Clark, who oversaw the printing press in Sibsagar, wrote to the mission board, emphasizing the accessibility of the Naga tribes to the gospel and speculating about their potential for conversion (ABFMS, 1887, p. 224).

Missionary interest in the Nagas intensified, and by the late 19th century, the missionaries began to view the Nagas as a promising field for evangelization. Many Nagas who travelled to the Assam plains for trade had shown interest in the missionaries' work, especially in the printing press and schools. Clark was able to capitalize on this reported interest of the locals in education (Thomas, 2016, p. 11).

One of their first initiatives upon arriving was to establish schools. The first of these was founded by Mary Mead Clark in 1878, shortly after the mission's arrival. Initially set up as a girls' school, it was later made co-educational, with both boys and girls being taught to 'read their own language'. This was followed by the opening of a second school in 1880 at Merangkong village, led by Rev. Clark and overseen by Godhula and M.D. Burnath, Assamese assistants/evangelists. Missionaries noted an overwhelming response from villagers, who eagerly petitioned for schools to be established in their own communities, promising to send their children to the mission schools. Such requests and petitions were not limited to the Ao Nagas alone. Communities not yet evangelized by the American missionaries also made similar requests for teachers in their villages (Ao, 1998, p. 155).

Mission schools were thus introduced in various villages with the central aim being to assist in transferring Biblical knowledge to students whilst imparting simple reading, writing and arithmetic skills. The pupils of the mission schools were usually always the first ones to convert and practice the new religion. Thus, these schools, under the supervision of the missionaries, became important as sites that negotiated and diffused Christian principles (Rivenburg, 1941, p. 55). The school curriculum included reading the 'word of God', a little arithmetic, carpentry, blacksmithing, and typewriting (Eaton, 1984).

By the early twentieth century, the value of formal education and the opportunities it offered were well understood by the local population, and students attended schools voluntarily. Schools were increasingly seen as gateways to employment, particularly in roles created by the colonial government and within the mission itself (Rivenburg, 1941). There was a growing demand for clerks, interpreters, and other positions to support the colonial administration. Within the mission, there was also a strong emphasis on self-sufficiency. Missionaries like Rev. Perrine, who worked with the Ao Nagas from 1892 to 1905, stressed the importance of local churches being able to stand on their own, particularly in terms of manpower. While Assamese evangelists were regularly employed to assist in mission work, missionaries recognized the need for local workers. For many years, the goal of mission schools was to produce enough educated locals to staff the churches and help expand the mission (ABFMS, 1887, pp. 116-128).

Mary Mead Clark, who opened the first school in the Naga Hills, noted that initially the people were not too keen for education on

learning the process of getting educated (Clark, 1907, p. 84). She wrote,

On opening our first school the children came pouring in as if for a holiday; but, as soon as they understood that quiet and attention were the rule, all was changed. Then, to get them in at all, it was necessary to hold our session in the early morning, before the day's work in the field began and, even then, we were never certain whether they would be in the schoolroom or, like monkeys, in the trees, on the roofs of the houses or some other place. But gradually there came to be some appreciation of what educated boys and girls might be and do.

Eventually however, the school initiative of the mission was a success. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the mission operated 203 schools throughout the Naga Hills (Eaton, 1984). Attending school was becoming increasingly common, with schools seen as a clear symbol of 'progress' and a pathway to improved lives.

In addition to the primary schools in the villages, Impur, the mission station for the Aos also had a middle school. Initially these schools, apart from the occasional financial support received from the government, operated independently of its directives, giving the mission near-total control over education among the Naga communities. The mission not only selected and trained village school teachers, but also wrote the textbooks used in the schools and conducted annual inspections to monitor the schools' progress (Eaton, 1984, p. 11). It was only towards the beginning of the twentieth century that the government began to take more direct interest in the working of schools (Walling, 2001, p. 81).

For those seeking higher education, enrolment at a high school in either Jorhat or Shillong was necessary, typically with stipends provided by the mission or the government. Over time, a high school was established in Kohima, and a training school for preparing church workers was set up in Impur.

The education system established by the missionaries facilitated the movement of hundreds of students who left their ancestral villages to pursue schooling. Gradually, individuals who attained higher education were held in high esteem, with one former student of the Impur Mission School describing them as 'having reached the sky' (Wati, 2008, p. 175). Impur, Kohima, and emerging urban centres like Jorhat, Shillong, and Calcutta soon became destinations for many Naga boys seeking to further their education.

The significance, and perhaps even reverence, that literate individuals placed on their school experiences is clear. This can largely be explained by the understanding that education was

essential for adapting to the new socio-political landscape shaped by colonialism (Nokden, 1989; Wati, 2008). As Nokden, a prominent figure among the Aos of the twentieth century puts it, education was seen as a means to secure future rewards, presumably in the form of employment opportunities. Another key reason for the esteem placed on education was its role in granting access to knowledge that 'opened their eyes to the world'. Labelling the Nagas as 'isolated primitives', both missionaries and the colonial administration sought ways to encourage interaction between these communities and the broader world, primarily through the system of education. Students at the Impur mission school and the various high schools across Assam in the twentieth century not only learned the basics, but many of the older students became part of a broader knowledge network that connected them to new and previously unexplored social and intellectual circles, leading to a sense of awakening, as they felt their eyes were opened 'to see the world' (Nokden, 1989, p. 18).

Thus, individuals who once understood their world primarily within the context of the Assam plains were now beginning to broaden their perspectives, developing new understandings of the world they inhabited and re-evaluating their earlier practices. This shift in worldview was closely tied to the broader social and cultural transformations catalysed by the missionary education system, which not only provided access to new knowledge but also fostered a sense of collective identity and a vision for future change within the community. This sentiment is captured perfectly by I. Ben when he wrote (Wati, 2008, p. 324),

I, the one named Donald, now named Bendangwati; the eldest among the grandchildren of our grandfather, Odangchetba, and the eldest son of Imchaba Master, though from a race of those who hunted for heads with *dao* and spear, now a child studying lessons with the head, holding the pen and books, had come out first in Class VI- it was a great honour for our family.

In the early twentieth century, a growing number of individuals shared similar experiences and actively worked to expand their community—one that was increasingly engaged in the sweeping changes reshaping the Naga Hills. In fact, by the late nineteenth century, Christian converts and students had founded various associations and societies focused on the 'welfare' and 'unity' of the people. These associations were officially described as being organized by the mission 'to serve as forums for discussions on social welfare activities and church policy' (Eaton, 1984). However, their role extended beyond this, also fostering a sense of collective identity

and social cohesion within the community. Additionally, these societies also functioned to unite Nagas from the same linguistic groups (Eaton, 1984).

The first of such association among the Ao Nagas was founded in 1897, when the Ao Association was established by the Ao churches with the goal of ‘unifying all Naga Christians and tribes into a strong collective’ (Ao, 2002, p. 33). It is important to note that, in the early twentieth century, several Naga tribes - such as the Konyaks, Sangtams, Changs, Semas, and Lothas - fell under the jurisdiction of the Impur mission station and were thereby incorporated into the Ao churches.

In the same year, the Christian Endeavour Society was formed, serving as a youth organization where Christian youth could meet and share their ‘Christian experiences’. These associations and societies provided platforms for what was viewed as ‘social transformation.’ For instance, one of the resolutions passed during the first Ao Association meeting in March 1897 was: ‘Every parent should send their children to school’ (Wati, 2008, p. 32). I. Ben Wati later described the Christian Endeavour Society as a means through which ‘many people became good through the discipline of the Christian Endeavour Society, rising to become leaders in the church and the community’.

Another key student organization that emerged from the educational initiatives of the missionaries was the Ao Kaketshir Mungdang/AKM/Ao Students Conference, founded on 29 December 1929. Often described as an ‘offshoot’ of the missionary education system, the AKM was formed by educated Ao youth with the objective of advancing the ‘welfare’ of the Ao people. Its vision centred on providing ‘leadership to the people in matters of education and social change’. Over time, the AKM remained committed to this mission and became one of the first student organization in Northeast India. One of the most notable achievements of the AKM was the publication of the Ao vernacular newspaper, *Ao Milen*, from the year 1937.

A newspaper for the ‘welfare of the people’

In November 1932, missionary Wickstrand, who was then working among the Aos, in a letter to the mission board, the body that financed mission work, outlined the nature and content of a newspaper he had started. He noted that the publication marked a significant milestone for the year as the first religious and secular newspaper in

the region. The paper was well-received by the local people, though its acceptance was gradual. Wickstrand acknowledged that the Ao people, being traditionally conservative, were initially sceptical of such innovations, yet schoolchildren and those away from home, in particular, appreciated the paper. He also pointed out that it was a valuable tool for pastors, complementing their work, and served as a bridge between the missionaries and the Ao community. Additionally, the newspaper helped solidify the Aos' identity as both a tribe and a Christian community. Its content included news, general interest articles., e.g., improved farming techniques, a question-and-answer section, simple Gospel sermon outlines, and stories aimed at illustrating spiritual truths. Wickstrand believed the paper met a genuine need and hoped it would contribute to greater literacy achievements among the Ao Nagas (ABFMSR).

The newspaper in question was the *Ao Naga Messenger*, which began publication in 1932. It was a monthly publication, with an initial circulation of 200 copies printed at Dose and Co. in Jorhat, Assam. By 1937, the paper underwent significant changes: the Ao Students' Conference/AKM took full control, and the paper was renamed *Ao Milen*. From January 1, 1937, the publication frequency increased to bi-monthly, and by 1937, the subscription numbers had risen to 400, reaching 500 by the following year (Nagaland State Archive).

One challenge in studying the *Ao Milen* is that the Students' Conference did not make efforts to collect or archive the back issues. As a result, only a few scattered copies of the paper are available, often through private collections. This lack of documentation can be partly explained by the transient nature of the newspaper's publication. Since the editors were often students who moved between different locations, the paper was printed at various places, including Impur, Guwahati, Shillong, and Allahabad.

However, from the back issues that are accessible, it is clear that the paper's purpose was primarily ideological rather than commercial. Its stated mission was to promote the uplift of the Ao people. By the time the newspaper was launched, the concept of 'modernity,' particularly as defined through the lens of education and missionary influence, had already gained traction among the educated Aos. The paper sought to promote this modernity, which was often associated with Christianity. Missionaries, for example, praised the cleanliness, intelligence, and even 'manliness' of Christians compared to non-Christians. This narrative of modernity became embedded within the paper, which frequently featured content on hygiene, education, and Christianity, while also offering secular news. Although secular

in some respects, the paper's early issues were notably focused on religious topics, highlighting the strong connection between the newspaper and its Christian roots. For example, the July 1937 issue featured a short biography of John Bunyan, author of *The Christian Pilgrimage*, one of the first books translated into Ao after the Bible. The issue primarily focused on news from Ao churches, though it also introduced world news under the section 'Alima Osang/World News', informing readers about the Spanish Civil War and global events in Britain, France, Scotland, and the U.S. (*Ao Milen*, No. 5. Vol. 1, 1937).

An interesting article from the June 1941 issue, titled 'Tenung Nunga Kechi Ali'/What's in a Name, responded to a prior article criticizing the use of foreign names (*Ao Milen*, June, Vol. 5, 1941). I. Ben Wati, the writer, argued that names should not define a person's identity, especially considering that he himself had been forced to change his name from Donald to Bengdangwati under government orders. This was during the period when the government was attempting to undo the perceived 'damage' resulting from the tribals' interaction with 'civilization' and 'modernization'.

The same issue also featured a letter of appreciation from the President of the Assam War Fund for the Ao Students' Conference's contributions to the war effort.

Contributors to the newspaper were mostly schoolmasters from Impur School and Jorhat, local preachers, missionaries, and students. In 1941, B. I. Anderson, a missionary at Impur, remarked on the difficulty of collecting subscriptions for the paper, noting that while the Students' Conference claimed ownership, it had not been particularly helpful in terms of financial support. However, Anderson expressed gratitude for the students' contributions to the paper's content. He emphasized that the future of the paper depended on continued financial backing, acknowledging that it filled an important role in the community (ABFMSR).

Although the Students' Conference took over full editorial control of the *Ao Milen* by 1937, the missionaries remained involved, considering the newspaper part of their 'literary work'. In 1941, Anderson reported that while the paper was regularly printed, delays occurred when the type-setter fell ill, necessitating the training of a new printer—a slow process (ABFMSR).

The newspaper's journey was not without difficulties. Added to the above-mentioned factors, during the 1950s and 1960s, the publication ceased due to financial constraints. It briefly resumed in the 1970s but was again interrupted by the state of Emergency

declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (Atsongchanger, 2012, p. 44). After lying dormant for nearly 15 years, the *Ao Milen* was revived in the 1990s and continues to be published today.

The launch of the first newspaper in the Naga Hills had a profound impact on the public sphere in the region. It gave the Ao people a platform to express their views and engage in the exchange of ideas. Despite the fragmented availability of back issues, the paper facilitated ongoing dialogue, with contributors—many of whom were more educated than the average Ao—frequently discussing issues affecting Ao society, ranging from social concerns to religious matters, all centred on the theme of upliftment.

Another significant feature of the newspaper was its role in introducing new concepts, practices, and ideas to its readers. For instance, many of the early articles focused on hygiene, offering practical advice on avoiding illness and caring for pregnant women. By disseminating these ideas, the *Ao Milen* helped the Ao people embrace certain modern practices and values that were seen as improvements over traditional ones.

The newspaper also served as a public forum where different sectors of society—pastors, teachers, and students—could participate in discussions about issues important to the Ao community. The response from readers, often in the form of follow-up articles and rejoinders, demonstrated the paper's role in fostering public discourse. In this sense, the *Ao Milen* became an 'open public forum, open to all manner of views and opinions'.

Added to these, one of the paper's most notable contributions was the creation of a shared sense of belonging among its readers, what Benedict Anderson calls an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991). By regularly addressing its readers as 'Milen readers', the paper fostered a sense of solidarity among them, even though many of the readers remained strangers to each other. An example of this is the 1941 article on the *Literary Campaign*, which assumed that readers of previous issues would be familiar with the efforts of students to promote adult literacy in the villages (*Ao Milen*, June, Vol. 5, 1941). This shared awareness created a feeling of connectedness among readers, helping to form a distinct, informed community.

Conclusion

The missionary-driven education initiatives in the Naga Hills, particularly those focused on the Ao Nagas, present a complex narrative of cultural transformation, power dynamics, and ideological

influence. On the one hand, the establishment of schools and the dissemination of education by missionaries offered significant opportunities for the Naga people, providing them access to new knowledge, skills, and social mobility. On the other hand, these educational efforts were also deeply tied to colonial and religious agendas that sought to reshape the cultural and social fabric of indigenous communities in ways that served both missionary and colonial interests.

At the core of this educational endeavour was the mission school system, which combined formal education in subjects like reading, writing, arithmetic, and other skills with the transmission of Christian doctrine. This dual purpose—educating both for worldly progress and spiritual salvation—was a defining feature of missionary schooling. As noted, the Ao people were initially sceptical about formal education, but over time, the value of education became apparent, especially as it became associated with employment prospects and social mobility within the colonial and mission systems. The narrative of ‘progress,’ as articulated by missionaries and later reinforced by educated Nagas themselves, suggested that participation in formal schooling equated to embracing modernity, cleanliness, and moral superiority, often in contrast to what was framed as the ‘primitive’ lifestyle of traditional Naga society.

The nature of this progress was, as traced earlier, shaped by external influences. The school curriculum, for example, was not only about imparting literacy and vocational skills but also about cultivating a particular vision of what it meant to be ‘modern’. The missionaries’ association of modernity with Christianity—through the promotion of cleanliness, industriousness, and even ‘manliness’—reflects a broader colonial project of assimilating indigenous peoples into a Westernized world view. This process, although beneficial in some respects, also involved the erosion of traditional practices and knowledge systems. In this context, the adoption of formal education can be seen both as an empowering tool for the Naga people and a mechanism for the imposition of foreign values, values that increasingly became important as the twentieth century progressed. This is not to argue that all traditional practices and values became obsolete. However, while there is definite traces and evidences of the continuation of older traditions and values, newer practices like education, became more in vogue.

The missionary-run schools were crucial for the conversion of local populations to Christianity, and the students in these schools became the early adopters and proponents of the new religion and

the values that came attached to it. The close tie between the school system and the missionary project is evident in the curriculum, which emphasized Bible reading alongside basic education. As the missionary Rev. Perrine pointed out, one of the key aims of the mission schools was to produce a self-sufficient church that could rely on local manpower (Walling, 2001, pp. 64-67). Thus, the creation of educated locals was not merely for the purpose of social mobility or civic advancement but also for ensuring that the church and mission could continue to expand within the Naga communities, facilitating the spread of Christian influence.

The evolution of the *Ao Milen* newspaper, which emerged in 1932, reflects this shift along with the growing sense of self-awareness and communal identity among the educated Ao population. The newspaper's content, which blended religious and secular topics, mirrors the complex relationship between tradition and modernity that was central to the Naga educational experience. On the one hand, the paper served as a vehicle for disseminating Christian teachings and reinforcing the identity of the Ao people as both a tribe and a Christian community. On the other hand, it also began to engage with broader social issues, such as hygiene, farming techniques, and world news, which were key to fostering a sense of global awareness and connection among readers.

The *Ao Milen*'s role in promoting literacy, cultural transformation, and a shared community identity among the Aos is significant. The newspaper became a forum for public discourse where various sections of society—pastors, teachers, and students—could address issues affecting the Ao community. The paper's reach, however, was not uniform. Many of the issues, as noted, were poorly archived and scattered across private collections, which limits the ability to trace the full scope of its impact. Nevertheless, the newspaper fostered a sense of 'imagined community', creating a bond among readers who, though often strangers to one another, shared a common experience through their reading of the paper.

This development of a shared 'literary culture' among the educated Aos also played an important role in the formation of a distinct literary tradition in the Ao language. Without doubt *Ao Milen* played an essential role in the development of Ao literature and the promotion of literary awareness in the vernacular. It not only contributed to the growth of written Ao language but also helped establish a foundation for literary production in modern times. This is a crucial step in the development of a modern literary tradition, particularly in the context where oral traditions had previously been

dominant. The newspaper not only encouraged literacy but also influenced the way Ao people understood their world, encouraging them to critically assess their customs, practices, values and social systems.

However, the paper's ideological underpinnings were strongly shaped by missionary values, which often positioned indigenous practices and beliefs as inferior or outdated. While the paper's secular content and the diverse voices contributing to it indicate a space for critical engagement, the influence of missionaries remained strong. Missionaries, despite the paper's shift to local control, continued to view the newspaper as an extension of their literary work, highlighting the extent to which the missionaries remained involved in shaping the intellectual landscape of the Ao community.

The introduction of education and the establishment of newspapers in the Naga Hills represent pivotal moments in the region's engagement with modernity, colonialism, and Christianity. While these institutions created opportunities for socio-economic mobility and contributed to the development of a new sense of communal identity, they also served as tools of cultural assimilation, reinforcing the dominance of foreign values and practices. The legacy of these initiatives is thus dual: they empowered the Naga people in many respects, but also transformed their cultural landscape in ways that were shaped by external forces. The *Ao Milen* newspaper, as both a product and an agent of this transformation, encapsulates the complexities of this process, serving as both a forum for local discourse and a vehicle for the dissemination of missionary ideals.

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