Traditional Fishing Practices among the Ao Nagas: A Case Study of Mangmetong Village, Nagaland

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Abstract: The Nagas had to depend on animals for their subsistence and therefore various hunting methods kept being passed on through generations. The Nagas have been using various indigenous fishing methods and materials which were easily obtained from the jungle. However, Ao Naga people have turned to more practical and less time consuming modern ways of fishing. Since the introduction of modern technology, the traditional methods are getting abandoned and being forgotten. Hence, it was felt necessary to document the traditional fishing methods, the manner of distribution of fish, use of plant poisons and so on. The present study was undertaken in Mangmetong village of Mokokchung District, Nagaland to document various aspects of traditional fishing methods.

Keywords: Ao Nagas, Traditional Fishing Methods, Ethnography, Ao Nagas, Poison, Mangmetong, Distribution

Introduction

Many communities in India were and still are engaged in hunting and fishing for their livelihood, yet very few old folk are now left that know the traditional methods of hunting game and trapping fish. In particular, the traditional knowledge related to intricate ways of hunting and trapping without using modern ordnances is almost lost. Documenting and understanding of old practices is significant for ethnoarchaeological interpretations of the past. It is more so for various communities in northeastern India since many do not have a very long formally documented history. In such cases as of Nagaland it is thus necessary to unravel traditional knowledge using oral history and narratives available with old folks. Hence, it was decided to conduct ethnographic survey of traditional hunting practices among the Ao Nagas, one of many Naga tribes that live in Nagaland.

This study is based on data obtained by formal and informal interviews, questionnaires and independent non-participatory observer method. Part of this research was presented as master’s degree dissertation by the first author (Imchen 2015). The present study was undertaken in Mangmetong village of Mokokchung District, Nagaland to
document various aspects of traditional animal hunting methods that included fishing. Data gathered about game hunting and their analysis has been published earlier (Imchen and Joglekar 2015). The present work is based on interviews of 65 people of Ao Naga tribe of Mangmetong village conducted during the year 2013-2014.

**The Ao Nagas and the Study Area**

In *Nagaland* there are 14 major Naga tribes: Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sumi, Sangtam, Yimchunger and Zeliang and many other minor tribes. The Ao Naga people live mostly in Mokokchung district (Parwez 2013).

There are 80 Ao Naga villages located in six different mountain ranges - Ongpangkong, Langpangkong, Asetkong, Tzürangkong, Jangpetkong (previously known as Changkikong) and Japukong. The village Mangmetong is located in the Ongpangkong range. Among different Ao villages, there are minor cultural variations that are seen even in the spoken language. There are three main dialects - *Chungli*, *Mongsen* and *Changki* (Ghosh 1979). People of Mangmetong village speak *Mongsen* dialect, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family (Coupe 2008).

Mangmetong village is situated in Mokokchung district, Nagaland (Figure 1). This district is located in the northwestern part of the State overlooking the vast alluvial plains of Assam. The area comprises of Tertiary geological sequence and the landforms of the district have a series of sub-parallel hill ranges. Mokokchung district is hilly and has few plains. The hills vary from 1000 to 2000 m and the average height of the district is 1500 m. However, most people live at the altitude of 1000-1500 m AMSL (Ghosh 1979).

![Figure 1: Map of Nagaland and the District of Mokokchung](image-url)
Indigenous Fishing Methods

The information gathered from the elders in the Mangmetong village indicated that people still have knowledge of hunting in indigenous manner. People go for fishing expedition during dry season. The low level of water is suitable for catching the fish. The people still use a few of the indigenous fishing methods. Such methods and associated social behaviour has been described here.

‘Aongmapang’ is a committee of 30 male individuals that looks after the forest jurisdiction of the village. The committee has full authority over the forest but it does not participate in the village administrative system at any level. The eligibility criteria to be a member of Aongmapang are: the man should be married, physically and mentally strong and should be 30-45 years of age. The members are selected from all different clans of the village and are appointed by the village heads. This committee still functions today in many Naga villages (Imchen and Joglekar 2015).

Since fishing expedition is mostly a community affair, the Aongmapang committee keeps a regular watch on the people while they fetch the fish. People who belong to the age group of 16 years and above are compulsorily made to fetch the fish, and if found sitting idle they are beaten up by a cane stick or are imposed with a fine, whereas children who are under the age of 16 years are exempted from this work.

The age groups, also known as ‘Yanga’ or ‘Zünga’ by the local people play a major role in fishing and related activities. The age groups are: Tzüier yanga (16-20 years), Yangrıüdang yanga (21-25 years), Tatongyanga (26-30 years), Yangasemba yanga (31-35 years), and Juzen yanga (36-40 years). The men are given duties to perform according to their age group especially in hunting expeditions. These are indispensable part of their social life (Luithul 2001).

Fishing with Use of Poison (Yongyok)

Fishing expedition has always been a community affair. The villagers during the past did not apply any modern-day fishing techniques. Since half of the area was covered with wild vegetation people learned how to use the vegetation and forest products for hunting and fishing.

Fish poison, locally known as ‘arr/arüü’ is used to catch fish. The plant providing this poison is easily available in the jungle. The reason for using this fish poison is that it lasts for a short period of time in the water and it does not pollute the whole water body. The use of fish poison also added a taste to the fish. Thus it is clear that the fish poison was safe for human consumption. People carry a basket made of bamboo to put the fish they catch which they carry it around the torso. This basket is known as Angakang (Figure 2).

There are three main types of fishing methods using poisons involving different parts of different plants.
Süli Yongyok
This method of fishing is carried out during the month of June-July. Süli (*Millettia pachycarpa* Bentham) is a creeper which is pounded on the river bank (Figure 3). The resultant juice of the root (*arr*) stupefies the fish, allowing the fishermen to catch the fish easily. This practice is common among the Ao Nagas and also in some other Naga tribes. Before heading out for fishing, some of the men go to the jungle and collect the roots of süli. The roots are hammered, some people strike the roots on stones; some strike it with wood and some step on it. During this process of pounding the roots some people throw mud on the creeper. It is believed that this process has a profound result for stupefying fish. A bridge known as Chadang is built using bamboos at the end of the stream which blocks the fish from escaping beyond a certain point. After the juice is put in water, fish get paralysed. Since this is a community activity, people with the fish basket line up to catch the fish. The person who collects the fish gives it to the person who is on his right side and that person will give it to the person who is on his right side and so on until all the fish is collected together. A person cannot keep the fishes he catches for himself. This method of passing the fish is known as Ngalu Thetepa. In this method the Aongmapang committee occupies an area to catch the fish for themselves and also for people who are old aged. This is called Ayim nga (Ayim – village, nga –fish).

Kajang/Akhojang Yongyok
This practice is quite common among the Ao tribes. The Aongmapang announces beforehand about the fishing expedition, so that the village folk prepare themselves. This method of fishing is slightly different from that of Süli yongyok method. This
method is practised in the month of August which involves the use of the nut cover and leaves of the walnut (*Juglans regia Linn.*) to get juice. This juice kills or paralyses the fish. After reaching the river people make conical basket or *Ziko/Zyikho* (Figure 4) to be utilized for pounding the fruit. The *chadang* (bridge) is also build at the end of the stream (Figure 5). When the basket has been made it is placed on the river which is then called *semki*, the fruits are set and are pounded. In case of one *semki* four or five individuals stand and pound the fruits that are mixed with mud. While pounding the *arr*, men sing following song.

*Tanū zoni pangko, Ayim yongyok ratai, Atsū Tsüngrem nü moaiang ni* (Today on this sunny day, villagers are going to fish, may water god bless us)
Figure 4: Sketch of Ziko/Zyikho and Metem
Figure 5: Chadang

Figure 6: The Fruit of *Diospyros lanceifolia*
Rüja Yongyok
This method is practised in winter season (November-December). The whole village community takes part in this type of expedition. But the people who were imposed with fines for various misbehaviours (and not obeying the rules of the village) are not allowed to participate. The skin of the Rüja (Diospyros lanceifolia) (Figure 6) is crushed and the juice is released in river. This juice de-oxygenates the water, and either kills or paralyses the fish. This method is also similar to the Kajang/Akhojang but the difference is its use in different seasons. The day before the expedition people from the three age groups Tsüier yanga, Yangr마다ng yanga and Tatong yanga collect the fruits. After reaching the river one group prepares the Rüjem which is made of bamboos. The conical basket (Ziko/ Zyikho) (Figure 4) is stacked tightly on the stone so that while pounding the fruit with the pestle (metem) it does not loosen up. This type of fishing is done at night since it takes the entire day to set up the poison. The traditional lamp made of split bamboo is used for visibility. In this method chadang (the bridge) which prevents the fish from escaping is not constructed.

The three methods mentioned can be employed by individuals also. At present the people who are more into traditional way of hunting use this method to catch fish as they said it is much safer and less toxic to the human body as compared to use of artificially manufactured chemical poisons.

Kotilakang/Changpangkang
Kotila means Fish and kəng means basket. The meaning of Changpang is crab. Kotilakang/Changpangkang is a cylindrical bamboo basket mainly used by persons who head out for fishing or catching crabs alone (Figure 7). According to the person who narrated, this took him three days to make one of such basket. The small bamboo is known as Tsülapongdang (Tsüla here means earthworm) which has a hole.

While preparing to catch fish an earthworm acts as the bait. It is put inside the bamboo and the opening is closed either by a small stone or leaves. This bamboo is placed inside the basket, and then the basket is kept in the water supported by stones. The odour of the earthworm which comes out from the hole attracts the fish, and they enter the basket. Many types of fish and even crabs are caught using this basket.

Distribution of the Catch (Fish)
The distribution of the catch in Kajang/ Akhojang yongyok and Rüja yongyok are similar. Ao people after catching the fish keep the fish in a house made of bamboo (locally known as Chendem) and here fishes are distributed according to age. The eldest member is given the biggest fish followed by the second eldest member who is given the second biggest fish, and so on. The tradition of distribution has changed over the period of time. Since the village populations have increased, the sector-wise system of distribution is put into place. So whenever the fishing expedition takes place the Chendem which is used to keep fish is build sector-wise and then the fishes are distributed according to age.
There is competition among the villagers, where people compete to catch the biggest fish. The person who catches the biggest fish is given the title Tzūzenketba, who is considered to be the smartest and quickest of all, he hold the title for a year.

**Modern Fishing Techniques**

At present fishing is also done using advance techniques like with help of handmade battery (Figure 8), bleaching powder (Calcium hypochlorite), gelatin sticks, etc. Even though the modern techniques are technologically advanced, make fishing easy and
less time consuming, they are harmful for the ecosystem. Also in some cases if used incorrectly or in excess they can harm the person handling them or consuming the catch.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Hunting was a mode of economic subsistence among all the *Naga* tribes and through times they attained perfection in these indigenous methods (Imchen and Joglekar 2015). Everything from planning of the expedition, to preparation, to execution and rituals that followed post-execution, every single step had some symbolic meaning to the villagers. During the olden days the hunting expeditions was mostly a community affair and there were social interactions among the people, allowing all the villagers to interact more and take part equally but at present, hunting has become more of individualistic interest. The introduction of the modern fishing implements and industrially manufactured chemical products had affected the social cohesion of the village and also the traditional customs were not followed strictly. Hunting has become more of a hobby as people are not relying on hunting economy fully, but in the past it was mandatory for the males to participate in the hunting expedition if the village organises and if he refuses to participate he was imposed fine.

The introduction of Christianity, education and road communication has changed the Ao Naga society. The people in the village are no more hunter-gatherers and they have found different ways of survival by farming and migrating to the towns and cities for the betterment of their welfare. The social norms of the society were strict; every member of the society had to follow the rules of the society.

A person could start hunting only after attaining the age of sixteen years which is called *Tziulka yanga*. But the present society in the village does not follow the norms anymore; most of the interviewed persons had started hunting at the age of ten, and at present children as young as ten years can get access to the air guns. Till date, the Ao people hunt only in the village vicinity as it was followed in the past and the norms of the distribution remains the same.

This ethnographic study leads us to study the intangible evidence of behaviour/activities in the past which we do not find in the archaeological record. Nagaland was covered with dense jungles. People are adapted to the use of organic materials such as bamboos in their everyday life. Also the materials used for hunting were organic and perishable in nature. Almost half of the people in the village are now farmers. Yet many supplement their income by hunting (Bhupathy *et al.* 2013). The traditional knowledge of the Ao Naga people seems to be vanishing as the modern lifestyle is rapidly being adopted. Yet old folk still have some knowledge of earlier practices and norms related to fishing. The main aim was to record and document the traditional animal hunting practises of Mangmetong village before they vanish from memory has been partially done. Further more intensive and detailed studies are necessary at other Ao Naga villages.
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