



## Animal Imagery in Ao-Naga Aphorisms

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### Abstract:

The Aos are a major tribe of the state of Nagaland, a state in the North-eastern part of India. Mokokchung, one of the districts in the state, is the home and headquarter of the Ao-Naga tribe. Moatsü mong and Tsüngrem mong festivals are the two major festivals of the Ao-Naga. 'In a culture where the very principle of life and society are encoded in the spoken word, language becomes the communicator, prescriber and preserver of tradition. In the Ao-Naga context, language has played such a role by enshrining in the oral mode, the ethos and culture of the people' (T.Ao, 2012, p.168). Animal imagery abounds in Ao-Naga aphorisms through which valuable knowledge, culture and traditions of the people are preserved. They serve as a mirror to the society. Animal imagery is used to show the relationship between humans and animals. It enriches the observation and understanding of humans by using animal imagery. The thrust of this paper, therefore, is to identify some of the animal imageries which are dominant in the aphorisms of the Ao-Naga tribe of Nagaland in the North-Eastern part of India, explain their meanings and their implications as social facts in the society.

Key words: Ao-Naga, aphorisms, animal imagery.

### Introduction:

Aphorisms are an important part of the Ao-Naga rhetoric and used widely to serve varied purposes ranging from advice, examples to praise. According to Cambridge dictionary Aphorisms are 'a short clever saying that is intended to express a general truth'. And according to Wikipedia, it is 'a concise, terse, laconic, or memorable expression of a general truth or principle. Aphorisms are often handed down by tradition from generation to generation.' 'The Ao-Naga oral tradition is not a mere form of 'story-telling' as opposed to a written, recorded version. It is in many ways the source of the people's literature, social customs, religion and history' (T.Ao, 2012, p.184).

There are numerous aphorisms mainly derived from nature due to the fact that the people lived close to nature. In a literary work 'imagery' refers to a simile, metaphor and descriptive words that bring pictures to the mind. It is a collection of images made out of words that helps in making the subject clear and conveys a message. Animal instincts and behaviours also help in defining the characteristics of humans. In Ao-Naga literature, animal imagery is abundant especially in folktales and aphorisms. This helps in identifying and understanding the similarities between two objects belonging to different categories. Animal imagery, in Ao-Naga aphorisms, have been widely used to represent and depict various human behavioural traits, experiences and mannerisms based on the traditional values, beliefs and view of the people. Both domestic and wild animals are also used in aphorisms to advise people against disagreeable attributes and all sort of social vices. These animals are used through aphorisms to direct people towards positive behaviours.

These aphorisms form a vital part of Ao-Naga's rich oral tradition. They were widely used by the ancestors due to the fact that it contains a whole lot of meaning in a few words which otherwise would require many words and lengthy explanations. The very essence of aphorisms being brevity helped in deeper interpretation and understanding of the

given situation. They also give a greater effectiveness to what is being conveyed. In the recent years there is an increase interest in use of aphorisms in the society for any kind of social discourse.

#### Pig imagery:

1. 'Ak chir Ak, Keyi chir Keyi' means 'a pig's offspring will be a pig, a tiger's offspring a tiger' which means a person will always be a mirror of his/her parents. It is usually used in situations when two person's social etiquettes are being compared.
2. 'Ak-i anüing penzü ama' literally means 'a swine looking at the sky'. It is impossible for a pig to look at the sky. This aphorism is used sarcastically describing a wish or dream for something that is impossible. The pig is used as an image for a person hankering after something beyond one's capacity. This warns people against wishful thinking and to be realistic in life.
3. 'Ak matsüngdang berem entok' means throwing precious gems before swine. A swine do not know the value of precious gems. A person who doesn't value words of wisdom is compared to a swine. It is useless to spend time and give valuable advice to a person who will not value it or will not change.
4. 'Ak oktsü bang araker marakjem ama' means difficult or impossible to muzzle a sow's mouth. Despite cautioning, chiding, and admonishing when it is difficult to discipline or control a crowd/mob, this aphorism is used to describe the difficulty in controlling the people.
5. 'Ak nem chi tatsük agütsü ama' means giving hot rice to a pig. For a pig eating etiquettes are alien and so when a person chomps his food noisily, this aphorism is used to describe his lack of decorum.
6. 'Ak tzü chigu ama': like giving bath to a pig. Pigs love muddy water and even if given a bath, it will go back to the muddy water and become dirty again. Therefore the pig imagery explains the situation where a person tries to keep his work honest and clean, yet he fails. The importance of listening to the advice of elders is emphasized by this aphorism.

#### Prawn imagery:

1. Akong tsükli merem: red like a roasting prawn. A person who loses his temper and gets easily angered over small issues is compared to a prawn that turns red immediately when put into a burning fire.

#### Bird imagery:

1. Ali ozü tetüm nunga rongnir lir: Small birds always move in group and follow a leader amongst them. Likewise even among peers and in a group, there is a leader.
2. Alushijak tesepsür medem: like a sparrow building its nest. During nesting, a sparrow is seen tirelessly working until the nest is complete. A person who is hard-working or who works tirelessly is likened to a sparrow working on its nest.

#### Frog imagery:

1. Allui aupongki nung chuba ama: A frog inside a bamboo hollow and owning it. Frogs usually live in hollows in the ground but sometimes they also are found in bamboo hollows. This is in reference to someone who did not achieve their goals/ ambitions and now has to be contended with whatever little in life.
2. Allu-I lungbang metsübu ama: a frog who is not afraid of cliffs. A frog would never jump over cliffs but if it does, then the frog would be considered very brave. A person who is not afraid to speak the truth or stand for truth without any fear is likened to a frog that is not afraid of cliffs.

#### Elephant imagery:

1. Alushi makari shiti mesür masü: A man who doesn't have cultivable land, cannot afford to keep an elephant. This means a poor man cannot do big things. It also means a poor man cannot afford to dream big or achieve big things.

#### Chicken imagery:

1. Anchanui dena mechishi: even a chick pecked. A chick is small and considered harmless and mild. In a situation when a worthless insignificant person ridicules or jeer and taunt someone who has met with misfortune, 'even a chick pecked' expounds that particular situation.

2. An chanu lungtem ajushi ama: A chicken juggling a boulder. A chicken doesn't have much strength and can never pick up a boulder. So when a person tries to do something beyond his capacity or capabilities, he is compared to a chicken trying to juggle a boulder. It also means punching above one's weight. This advises people to keep their feet on the ground, to remain practical and sensible.
3. An kolok aden: chicken brain. This is used derogatively to describe someone who is dim-witted and dull. Also used for someone who makes futile and inconsequential plans and fails but never learns from his mistakes is said to be chicken brained.
4. An molokbang nung atem: a chicken perching on the rim of a basket and trapping itself. A person whose carelessness puts him in trouble or in danger is like a chicken sitting on the rim of a basket and getting trapped. It also means getting trapped in one's own devious plans.
5. Antepongia kongpeter: even a rooster cannot crow properly sometimes. Sometimes mistakes are made by a person who had been doing the same work. Likewise even the best master/ teacher makes mistakes. So a rooster's mistake is used to describe a similar situation with the human. This encourages understanding and respect for others even when they make mistakes.

#### Termite imagery:

1. Anong aponger ama: like flying termites. At the start of a new termite colony, there is a swarm of flying termites. So when a big crowd gathers and moves it is likened to flying termites.

#### Mice imagery:

1. Atembu koya chiyung ama: Like a house mouse eating under the floor board. Mice are very nimble and alert. People never know when they are eating under the floor board. This mannerism is likened to a shrewd person who works for himself with others having no clue of his work.

#### Dog imagery:

1. Azü chanu nem shiret mepodaktsü ama: A puppy chewing a big bone. It is difficult for a small puppy to chew a big bone and so after sometime the tired puppy would leave the bone. This is used to compare and describe a person wasting one's time and energy a useless venture or work.
2. Azü tepen nung ajemshi: stepping on a sleeping dog's tail. When you step on a sleeping dog's tail, it will bite you out of pain. In the same way when someone provokes another person's anger or ruffles someone's feathers without a cause or reason, this aphorism is used to describe the situation.
3. Azü dak azü bong marem ama: fleas that won't go away/ fleas that keep coming back. Dogs get infested with fleas time and again. It keeps coming back and trouble the dog. Sometimes problems never seem to end in a person's life or in a society. Just when you think that you have reached the end of the tunnel, you are faced with another problem. This situation is described as fleas that keep coming back again and again.
4. Azü nem shi nüka yutsü ama: a dog made to guard the meat. When a dog is made to guard a dog, it will definitely eat all the meat leaving nothing. Likewise when a dishonest person is made in-charge of finances, he will definitely empty the coffers. A dog made to guard the meat is used to describe such situations and such a person is compared to a dog.
5. Azü nem chilong nemtsü: giving food to a dog. When food is given to a dog, it will go away without any show of appreciation after gulping down the food. This is used to describe an ungrateful person who doesn't appreciate your help and your sacrifice.
6. Azü shiret agi anang ama: like a dog choking on a bone. When a dog chokes on a bone, it will cry out loud in pain for everyone to hear. A person who surreptitiously works only for his own benefit and later confesses everything is like a dog choking on a bone. This discourages selfishness and anti-social behaviour.
7. Azüi Azü dak asang: a dog barking at another dog. A thief catching and reprimanding a thief is like a dog barking at another dog. Similarly it is also used to describe a corrupt man admonishing another corrupt person.

#### Tiger imagery:

1. Keyi tepen nung am ama: like holding the tiger's tail. Tigers use their tail to communicate their emotions like aggression and docility. It is impossible and dangerous as well to hold a tiger by the tail. When a person is in a precarious situation, it is explicated by the aphorism 'like holding a tiger's tail.'

2. Kijai Keyi tepset ama: like killing a tiger singlehandedly. It is next to impossible to kill a tiger singlehandedly. But when a person brags about his work and success is elucidated by the saying 'like killing a tiger singlehandedly.' This explains how society disapproves of those who "act high" or think too highly of themselves and warn against self-aggrandizement as contemptible behaviour.

#### Snail imagery:

1. Küpraia mongomang ka chima: a snail ate a bunch of bananas. Snails are very slow and so it is unlikely that a snail can finish a bunch of bananas. But it is also possible if a snail continuously eat, it will finish eventually finish the bunch of bananas. This particular aphorism is used to encourage a person and boost morals. To continue doing what he is doing and not be discouraged but to persevere.

#### Tortoise imagery:

1. Kürai pei ki bener jaja ama: like a tortoise carrying its house wherever it goes. A person who always talks about his family matters and problems is like a tortoise carrying its house wherever it goes. This teaches social etiquettes and decorum needed in the conduct of social life.

#### Bee imagery:

1. Ninang süngpok nung arürteper ama: like bees buzzing inside the hollow of a tree. When a swarm of bees buzz inside the hollow of a tree, it makes a loud terrifying noise. This is used to describe the rumbling sound of a huge crowd.

#### Duck imagery:

1. Patak ama: like a duck. A duck loves water and is always preening itself. A person who spends a lot of time cleaning and grooming is compared to a duck.

#### Chameleon imagery:

1. Sangken atapisü dang nülak achi ama: like a chameleon intentionally delaying and getting speared. According to a popular folktale, a chameleon stood on the path of the villagers as they went to the fields. She wanted to hear what the villagers would call her and laid on the path waiting. But she was speared by one of the villagers instead. When a person, after making plans to start a work, delay and procrastinate, is foiled and frustrated by something and does not finish the work one planned is compared to the chameleon getting speared.

The animal imagery in Ao- Naga Aphorisms is a simple way of expressing and explicating a well-known truth based on common sense or experience. It helps in visualizing more realistically the message in the aphorisms. They are filled with ancestral wisdom, passed down from generation to generation until they become part of a society's oral tradition. They are used to impart knowledge, to advice, to teach or buttress morals, make an argument, assist in understanding, or inspire others. They are the collected wisdom of the elders of the community. They are a part of the daily speech such as in stories told by grandparents or instructions given by parents and elders. They tell us a great deal about the culture in which they are used.

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