



THE UNDERWORLD AS MEDIATION: A STUDY OF LOTHIA AND AO-NAGA ORAL TRADITIONS

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Abstract: The oral tradition of the Nagas exists as a mosaic of narratives and practices that underpin the architecture of Naga epistemology, forming a complex tapestry where ritual and material manifestations find their contextual representation in the narratives and often, intersect with each other. The narratives consist of mythical legends, simple and complex tales, ancient poetic verses (in song), riddles and proverbs. These narratives depict and function as accounts of a vanishing past, where belief is embodied within the substructure of the narrative manifestation. Having birthed in what Walter J Ong deems a “primary orality” culture (Ong, 1982, p. 21), the oral traditions show that similar traits are shared in three levels: clan, village and tribe. The availability of such versions and variations reflect the trajectory of their transmission over space and time, and attributes to the nature of Naga orality, encompassing both ritual and verbal art - a kinship through which a sense of shared Naga human experience is endorsed. This is particularly manifest in the ways oral narratives encompassing legends, myths of origin, folk beliefs and even proverbial sayings use similar tropes, motifs and archetypes, across the many tribes and particularly among tribes that have geographical proximity to each other. Carl von Sydow uses the term “oikotypification” to refer to the localised hybridisation of an item of folklore which engenders, explains and accounts for the presence of multiplicities and the recurrence of specific traits of folklore, acquired during the process of transmission.

Taking this as a backdrop, the paper aims to analyse one common denominator found among the Lotha and Ao-Naga oral traditions specifically – that of the underworld or the underground, a recurrent motif in the oral tradition of the two tribes. The presence of the underworld in both these narrative traditions(s) is both simultaneously obvious and obscured but plays a pivotal role in the creation and perpetuation of folk belief, and an important facet of the psychology of the culture. Hence, the paper illustrates how these two tribes construe and use the underworld as alternative realities that enables them to view themselves from the prism of the Other.

Keywords: Folklore, Naga, orality, culture, tradition

I. Introduction:

The Nagas are a group of tribes inhabiting the contiguous geographical location of India (Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal) and Burma. There are 15 recognized Naga tribes (Lotha, Ao, Angami, Chakhesang, Pochury, Rengma, Chang, Phom, Konyak, Khiamnuingan, Yimkhiung, Sangtam, Sümi, Tikhir and Zeliang), speaking more than 17 languages among themselves, with some tribes having more than one language. The oral tradition of these tribes is inscribed into their languages in the form of proverbial phrases and narrative folk poetry that have been orally handed over through generations. In the absence of a tangible script, the oral

tradition of the Naga tribes function as pathways through which a sense of the Naga past is invoked, and hence most often, function as assemblages of folk history, or a people's history and understanding about themselves.

The oral tradition of the Naga tribes exists today as a substructure to the dominant written and literary traditions, and forms the bedrock of Naga epistemology. As it exists today, the narratives reflect a historical and psycho-social paradigm that is non-linear and fragmented, possibly due to the devolution of the narratives; a phenomena one can associate with culture change as the Nagas conversion to Christianity in the 19th century came as a complete onslaught which engendered and problematized the way the Nagas themselves looked at their own animist-leaning pre-modern culture. In contrast to the written traditions, the Naga oral tradition encompass both oral tradition and performance (which in turn internalise the oral nature of narrative in literary texts). Ontologically then, Naga orality can be seen to be prior to the literal. The multiplicity of Naga oral narratives as implied above, is one that reflects a shared characteristic spirit that adds to the richness of folklore in Naga society. This quality is reflected not only in stories, legends and songs but also in the origin and migration narratives that are held in mythic regard in Naga society. They are sometimes reflected in the ways kinship patterns are forged with some clans allowing inter-clan marriage (endogamous) based on the system of phratry endorsed by the tribe.

II. The Lothas of Nagaland

The Lotha-Nagas are a major tribe of Nagaland with their district headquarters at Wokha. Similar to the other Naga tribes, the Lothas speak their own language, "*Lotha-yi*", or "*Kyong-yi*", which serves as a point of entry into understanding the nature of orality inscribed into the Lotha language and cultural traditions. According to oral tradition of origin, it is said that the Lothas alongwith some other Naga tribes departed from a place called Khezhakhenno towards the ancient village Tyui (located in Mount Tiyi) which is acknowledged by the Lothas as their first village, a central point from where migration and setting up of other villages took place. While some believe that the word "Lotha" is a transmogrification of the word "Latoo", there are others who believe that the term is derived from the Khezhha language (spoken in Khezhakenno, Nagaland) which refers to those who had gone too far ahead. Still others believe that the term came to being when Assamese traders used to interact with the Lotha villagers, who often came to the plains areas to buy goods from them. J. P Mills (1922, p. 1) testifies to this interaction between the Assamese and the Lothas stating, "Many villages even possess grants of lands in the plains given by the Ahom Rajas, on the understanding apparent that the Lothas in return for the land would refrain from taking Assamese heads". Mills's records on the origin of the Lothas stipulate that this kinship with the Assamese goes beyond chronicled history as "...the Lothas and Plainsmen were once one people who migrated from a placed called Lengka somewhere north or north-west of the Naga Hills, the exact site being unknown". This version of origin of the Lothas is no longer in circulation as part of oral tradition, as the Lothas subscribe mostly to the autochthonous theory of emerging from the hole of the earth near Kezakhenno.

Traditionally, the Lotha Nagas practised a form of animistic religion similar to the other Naga tribes that posited the Naga world as part and parcel of the larger cosmos in which custom, rite and ritual acted as ways of mediating and bridging the gap between the human and the "Other". Animism was a term propounded by Edward Burnett Tylor to reference a type of religious practice that at its core was a "belief in souls: the existence of human souls after death, but also belief that entities Western perspectives deemed inanimate, like mountains, rivers and trees, had souls" (Quijada, Roberto, 2022). However, this does not mean that the ancient Lotha religion only worshipped the embodied animate and the inanimate entities. They also acknowledged the presence of gods, godlings and dieties who played a big role in the ritual life of the Lothas. Likewise, the folklore of the Nagas show how the traditional Naga religion imbued to the world of nature (symbolising an "Other") a sanctimonious fervour which in turn evoked sentiments of fear and respect. This gave birth to practices such as feast of merit, the *genna* system (a rite manifest in the form of taboos which was strictly maintained in Lotha society). During this time it was taboo to engage in all normal activities such as intercourse, eating certain foods as well as venturing outside of the village gates. The underlying belief to this was that it was to prepare the village for a purification through which fertility could be spread throughout the village. Such practices and innumerable rites and rituals commingled with belief(s) through which an interaction with the supernatural could be mediated. Finally, this came to establish a credo known as the Lotha worldview.

2.1. The Lotha Worldview of the Underworld: Creatures, Encounters

The folklore of the Lothas construe the Underworld as an inverted universe, identical yet dissimilar to the world we know and experience as part of the human condition. In this sense, it is both a reflection and extension of the anthropocentric reality of humans where the unimaginable, undesired and the grotesque come to life with forceful anarchy. In contrast, the world of man is symptomatic of stability and order, in which benevolence and goodwill overpower the energy of the undesired. In this world, man features as the central definitive point of departure through which any experience (whether human or non-human) is measured. It is also in this human world of ordered systems and predictable patterns that supernatural entanglements and lapses are dealt through mediators such as custom and ritual.

Oral tradition of the Lothas also account for the presence of another world, the world of the *Potsows* (gods or deities). According to Mills (1922, p. 113), the *potsos* were entities that belonged to an “order... who live in a world like ours, of the earthy floor of which our sky is the underside”. This posits a ternary order within the Lotha belief system, with world of the *potso*, the human world and the netherworld as distinct domains of experience, each simmering in their own energies and intersecting with each other at intervals. While the supernatural world is inhabited by an order of *potsos*, the netherworld is believed to be inhabited by the *Nüngkumvu/ Lungkumvu* who are goblin-like creatures, short in physical stature, who embody those aspects of the human that are detestable, abhorrent and counter-normative to the established and accepted notions of decent human behaviour. As inhabitants of the netherworld/ underworld, their visitations upon earth are viewed with derision and fear, arising from their many exploits in the human world that have come down through oral tradition. This understanding of the *potsos* as claimed by J. P. Mills however has disappeared from the oral tradition of the Lothas today. In Humtsoe-Nienu’s book “God of the Tribes”, (2014, p. 85) she references a theologian Ezamo Murry who posits the presence of an omnipotent and omnipresent monotheistic Creator who is “the God of the heavens who creative everything including humans. The Kyongs call this God ‘*Potsow*’”, who is the words of Murry, “the high God”.

The luminous underworld of the Lothas is projected in lore as the underside of the human world inhabited by demon-like creatures, goblins, dwarf-like “fairies” who roam and rule this uninhabitable world. The term “fairies” here was used by the informants to denote creatures that were short and stout in stature and not in the western sense of the term derived from the trope of the fairytale. Another facet of the creatures from the underworld is their ability to travel between both realms without shapeshifting. Lotha lore states that once they come to the earth, they dwell in the deep woods. The presence of these beings plays such a significant role in Lotha society that even during the birth of the child, it is believed by many that the name of the child must be whispered when first announced to the world so that the *Nüngkümvä* do not get to know the name of the child. Hence a fake name signifying something undesirable such as bitterness, sourness, is given to the child until the 5th day (baby girl) and 6th day (baby boy) when the actual naming and ear-piercing initiation ceremony takes place. According to Mills, a famous place of the *Nüngkümvä* lies near the village of Akuk where they have been spotted (Mills, 1922, p. 119). Another story is that of a woman named Yaniyo Ngullie of Okotso village who it is believed, was taken by the *Nüngkümvä*. In an interview with Mrs. Mhalo Murry of Okotso village, she narrated the story of Yaniyo Ngullie who had gone missing for about 21 days. She was found in a shambles and unkempt hair and semi-consciously walking down the road. Folklore states that once the *Nüngkümvä* comes in contact with a person, that person gets affected by a lunacy and they feel that the world has literally gone topsy-turvy. On return back home, the people vomit out all the food fed by the *Nüngkümvä*, like insects, snails, earthworms and other creatures that mostly are found when the earth is dug up. It is also believed that the *Nüngkümvä* only kidnap people who exhibit abnormal tendencies or very young children. Such folklore instilled a deep fear of the underworld in the Lotha imagination. People who were previously taken captive by the *Nüngkümvä* state that during the time of their trance-like captivity, they saw the ground to be the sky and vice versa while the creatures chanted “*hayilelanthuile*” (a phrase used to call and gather people in the hills) while taking their victims away. Oral tradition states that because of their feet (which are turned in the opposite direction to normal feet), they find it difficult to walk through plain areas but are quick on their feet when they walk up-hill. These beings are capable of carrying people away from their homes to strange destinations and they are given snails and earthworms to eat (which is also believed to be the food of the *Nüngkümvä*). From this we can see how the *Nüngkümvä*, a creature from the seedy underbelly of the earth, become symbolic of those negative and heteronormative aspects of the human experience such as depravity, death, lunacy, irrationality and unbridled and uncontrolled baser instincts.

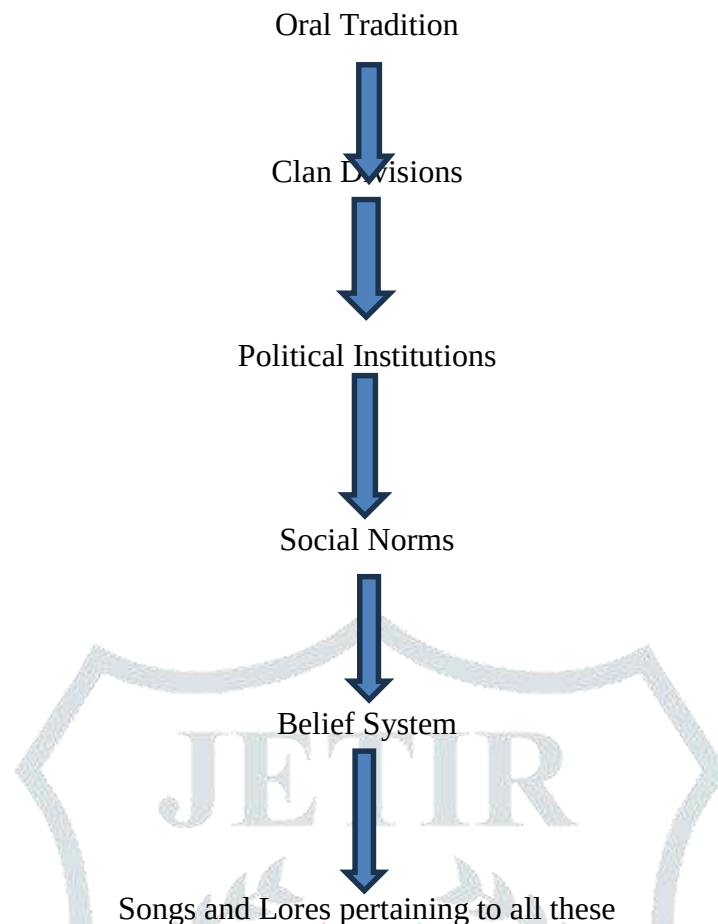
Another aspect of the Lotha underworld stems from one of their myths which implicate the underworld as part of their story of origin and migration. Mills (1922, p. 3) mentions the story of the origin from a hole in the earth near Kezhakenoma, out of which three brothers Limhachan, Izumontse and Rankhanda emerged. These three brothers form the skeleton of the kinship structure of Lotha society. Likewise, another narrative of Lotha origin supposes the emergence from a hole under the earth as an accidental discovery. This narrative was not found among many villages but is documented by Anungla Aier from the village of Shaki. In Aier's recording of the origin story, the narrator specifically mentions, "as told by the Lotha forefathers, our ancestors were living in a village underneath the ground" (Aier, 2018, p. 27). In this underworld, there lived two demons called *Tsotsuo* and *Yutsuo* who ate two humans daily, one at breakfast and the other at dinner. Even though the Lotha people tried to escape from the underworld there was no way they could fruitiously plan their actions as the two demons wandered among them. However, one day, as some of the villagers were out on a hunt waiting to kill a deer, they saw the deer escape through a hole by lifting the slab of a stone that had been covering their underworld. They followed the deer and removed the slab of stone only to discover the beautiful land. After this, they went back to the villagers and told them about it. When the two demons tried to follow the villagers out of the hole, they could not pass through the passage. In some variations, the story follows the porcupine instead of a deer (Aier, 2018, p. 27, 28).

From this, we can gather that the Lotha underworld/ underground is a recurrent motif in their folklore. This is particularly manifest in the way the folk belief in the prowess of the *nungkumvu* continue to hold place in the Lotha imagination, thus paving a way through which their narratives, testimonies and practices continue to include and implicate the underworld in various discursive ways.

III. The Aos of Nagaland: Lithic Origins and beyond

The Ao Nagas, one of the prominent Naga tribes, primarily inhabit the Mokokchung district of Nagaland. Their reverence for natural forces and elements as spirits and deities, along with the tradition of taboo systems, is intricately woven into their culture. The tribe is characterised by distinct beliefs, traditions and way of life which are encapsulated in their indigenous concept of "*Sobaliba*" where "*soba*" translates to "*birth*" and "*liba*" means "*act of living*".

The origin story of the Ao Nagas, in particular that of the *chungli* speaking communities, is rooted on an autochthonous myth of origin, which the people hold as the fundamental truth of their existence. It is the sacred belief that their ancestors emerged out of the "*Longterok*" which translates to "*six stones*" at Chungliyimti (presently in Tuensang district). Oral tradition holds that three males named *Longpok*, *Tongpok* and *Longjakrep* and three females named *Lendina*, *Yongmenala* and *Elongshe* emerged out of a hole in the ground at Longterok. The three males eventually became the patriarchs of the three main clans of the Ao-Naga. With this came the initiation of the order of clans and phratries within the tribe, which in turn shaped kinship structure and social organisation. Temsula Ao points out how the Aos tradition evolved over a period of time and maps the trajectory of Ao culture in this manner (Ao, 2009, p. 9)



Central to the creation of this worldview lies the origin myth of Longterok, which implies the existence of a civilisation prior to it as noted by Mills, “Ao tradition states quite definitely that the ancestors of the tribe came out of the earth at Lungeterok...” (Mills, 1926, p. 6). If the Aos emerged from earth, then it presumes the presence of an experiential reality before Longterok, somewhere in the bowels of the earth. The hold of Longterok in the Ao imagination is so significant that “the Ao socio-cultural and customary beliefs and practices will be incomplete if one ignores those legends and historical facts that took place in the process of socio-cultural evolution where the Ao renaissance occurred at this historical place.” (Jamir and Ao 2005, p. 26).

Interestingly, Anungla Aier (2018, p. 35) draws parallels between the origin myth of the Aos with that of the Sangtams who share corresponding clans like the Aos (*Thongrü- Pongen*), *Langtethongrü* (*Lemtur*), *Anar* (*Aier*) and *Chingrü* (*Waza Chami*). She alludes indirectly to phases of civilisation. According to her Sangtam source, “the culture of Chungliyimti went through different stages and these stages are defined by him are (i) *Mütitakong* (ii) *Sümedem* followed by the (iii) *Chungliyimti stage*.” (Aier, 2018, p. 35) According to this variant of the oral tradition of *Chungliyimti*, the *Mütitakong* stage is said to be the stage of civilisation where humans, spirits and animals lived as one. While on the surface the Ao oral tradition does not refer to the term *Mütitakong* or delineate specific stages, according to the Ao sources (Panger Imchen) interviewed by Aier, the Ao’s “*Sümedem Lima*” “was the second phase of the earlier ancient period which indicates the recognition of an earlier phase prior to *Sümedem*”. Furthermore, oral tradition of the Mongsenyimti village, the Ao people are believed to have lived in a trance-like state, without any demarcation between day and night, and with no sense of themselves as a people for three “*Aso*”, meaning 100 years (Aier, 2018, p. 35). Hence, although there is no direct reference to a civilisation stage such as *Mütitakong*, the existence of the three first *Aso* of the Aos is markedly similar to the description of *Mütitakong*.

As far as the Ao oral tradition pertaining to their origin myth is concerned, there is no narrative manifestation of the existence of a thriving underworld like that of the Lothas with their different creatures and senses. However, J.P Mills makes a mention of a belief among the Mongsan speaking group of Aos who held a belief that their ancestors emerged from a ground in the hole near a place called *Kübok*. This particular oral tradition is no longer found circulated among the Aos as the *chungliyimti* myth has become the accepted narrative of origin of the Aos. Not much detail is mentioned regarding this supposed hole in the ground but for spare details such as the simple fact that “the Mongsan came out of the earth first and settled at *Kubok*, a vacant site on a spur running down from *Mokongtsu* towards the river *Dikhu*. The *Chungliin* turn emerged

and settled at Chungliyimti” (Mills, 1926, p.7). Further migration states that the ancestors of the Ao people, once settled in Chungliyimti (now in Tuensang district), sought new lands as their population grew. They travelled towards west side and eventually reached Dikhu river where they made a cane bridge to cross. Upon reaching the other side, they cut the bridge to prevent the others from crossing the river. The ones who were left behind called out and asked “*Na Aor?*” (Are you going ahead?). This is believed to be the origin of the word “Ao”, which in English means “going”.

Even in the matter of their belief, while the Aos acknowledge the existence of soul or spirits, it did not mean that they worshipped all inanimate objects around them. To these hillmen the universe is filled with multitudes of spirits with whom they must deal.....from them come diseases, madness, death of cattle, famine (Smith, 1925 p.108). Their “animism” served as a close representation of their spiritual practices and belief system. This animistic nature of Ao Naga religion is reflected in their social customs and rituals, including worship of gods, ancestral spirits, and the observance of festivals and ceremonies. “The religion of the Aos is not a moral code. It is a system of ceremonies, and strives as he may to do that which is lawful and right in the moral sphere, he will not prosper if he omits the sacrifices due to the deities around him who, unappeased are ever ready to blight his crops and bring illness upon him and his”(Mills, 1973, p.215).

Among the Aos it was generally believed that when a man dies, he goes to “*Asüyim*” which is believed to be the “Land of the Dead”. Opinions varied as to the exact location of the Land of Dead. Some were of the opinion that it was in the sky, other said that it was under Wokha Hill (Mills, 1973, p. 227) while another version say that it is an underground world where all the souls of the dead people go in order to begin a new kind of existence as it was believed that the souls of man can only go downwards (Ao T, 1999, p.58). “The Aos placed the entrance to the world of Dead under the earth at the same spot on Wokha Hills as do the Lothas.....and call the line of the white rock leading up to it *layasüphu*”(Mills, 1973, P. 227). The Land of the Dead is believed to be ruled by *Moatsüngba* or *Meyutsüngba* who is called *Motsüng* or *Mojing* and it is him who metes out appropriate forms of punishments to the souls according to their deed while on earth.

Oral tradition pertaining to the underworld of the Ao Nagas portray the world of the dead and the world of living as differentiated by a boundary line where a stream of water called *Lungritzü*, meaning ‘bitter water’ flows. It is said that once a person reaches this stream but does not cross over it, he can return to the land of the living. For ordinary men and women who die normal deaths, the way to *asüyim* was a smooth transition between the world of the living and the dead. However, babies born out of wedlock, or infants dying before being acknowledged by their fathers are believed to never reach this *land of the dead* but instead are turned into wild animals (Mills, 1975, p.228). The path to *Moatsüngba*’s house was haunted by the consequences of their earthly deeds. Similarly, those who led a righteous and honest life are allowed to enter the village of the dead whilst the dishonest and unrighteous are allowed to pass the village of the dead around by a side path.

From this, one can state that while the Aos conceptualise the underworld as a world where the unwanted and undesired of this world go to. Perhaps what is most interesting about the Ao notion is the Mongsen myth that situates and implies the presence of an underworld which the Aos escape from and enter into the world of the human. Psychoanalysts would often view such emergence from a hole in the earth as a symbol of birth, with the hole itself symbolising the natal experience.

IV: The Lotha and Ao Underworlds: An Exegesis

From the above, one can see how both the Lotha and the Ao imagine the underworld as antithetical to the living world, and the implications of the two are internalised in each other as one haunts the other. For the Lotha, the underworld is not the Land of the Dead but a very real fact of the geomorphology of the earth as creatures, demons, people (*nungkumvu*) from the underworld can traverse between both worlds. However, as implied above, when a human experiences the underworld, he is struck by a lunacy out of which, sometimes, he never fully recovers. Such incidents of being taken by the *nungkumvu* was recorded as late as 2021 when a person¹ believed to have been ill and on their way to Wokha for treatment mysteriously disappeared along with his wife.

The portrayal of the Ao underworld is markedly similar to portraits of Shaol/ Hell as reflected in the Hebrew Bible, where it is described as “the dark, cold place beneath the earth in which one continued an

¹The name of the persons have been protected for privacy reasons.

animated, albeit dreary, existence after death” (Noegel, 2017, p. 119). It is conceived of as a nether world of the damned, where social structures and the concreteness of the human world cease to exist. This is interesting because at the time when J. P. Mills and J. H. Hutton visited the Naga areas, there was minimal interaction with the Christian world, at least to the degree that it may have affected the culture of traditional story-telling and dissemination of lore, and at the time of his documentation, the origin myth had already been part of their robust oral tradition. In the case of Ao, the land of the dead is filled with dreaded, unwanted beings whose experience in the earth determine their predicament in the underworld. As far as the land of the dead is concerned, the Lothas believe that the souls of the dead go to a place called *echuli*, governed by the ruler Episangla, which is remarkably similar to that of the Ao Land of the Dead. However, unlike the *Asüyim*, the *echuli* is not located in the underworld but rather in a location near the ancient village of *Tyui*. Mills states, “Offerings to the dead are made not only on the grave, but also by the side of the path from the village which leads to the Land of the Dead under Wokha Hill” (Mills, 1922, p. 159). Quite interestingly, the Land of the Dead of the Aos as mentioned above, is also believed to be under Wokha Hill, however, as already stated, other versions also situate the Ao Land of the Dead in the underworld. The creation and existence of the Land of the Dead as existing in the underworld in Ao epistemology exhibits a similarity with that of the Lotha notion of the underworld as both these cultures construct the underworld as a dynamic force reflecting a deeply embedded duality in their cosmological belief. If we take these two versions (Ao and Lotha) as oikotypes of each other, then we may witness the transmission of culture between these two groups. Oikotype/Oicotype is a term coined by Carl von Sydow to refer to “the local form of a text type” (McCormick, 2011, p. 925). The process of oikotypification “occurs when regular changes occur in a text type’s content, style, or structure as it adapts to the preferred patterns of a particular locality of culture group” (ibid, p. 926). Since the process of oikotypification reflects localisation or the imbibement of local characteristics by a narrative type in order to sustain itself over geographies of transmission, it may be that both the Lotha and Ao conceptualisation of the world is an oikotype of a much bigger and overarching narrative frame.

Furthermore, in contrast to the Lothas who view the underworld as a domain of existence in which the role of the human at most is that of an intrusive outsider, whose earthly actions are divorced from those who inhabit the underworld, the Ao Nagas view the underworld as a realm of judgement ruled by a powerful deity who upholds justice for the soul of the dead. While both Lothas and Ao Nagas have distinct cultural beliefs, both tribes view the underworld as a mirror of the human world, where boundaries between the living and the dead are inhabited by supernatural entities. In this sense, we can hypothesise that the underworld in both cultures reflects the fears and anxieties of the living and hence, become embodiments of those parts of the mental psyche that is privy to the baser and darker instincts.

V: Conclusion

The representations of the underworld in Lotha and Ao-Naga oral traditions offer a fascinating glimpse into the spiritual and cultural life of these Naga tribes, showing how community psyche is constructed along the binaries of us vs them, mediated through ritual, folk tale, belief or in the case of the Lothas, the *nungkumvu*. Despite their differences, both tribes share a deep belief in the existence of alternative realities that mirror and influence the human world. These underworld narratives reflect the broader Naga worldview, where the natural and supernatural are inextricably linked, and where oral traditions serve as a vital means of understanding and navigating the complexities of existence. Most significantly, these tropes, which are legacies of oral tradition become, in essence, what Jan Vansina states as “the principles through which experience is internalised” (Vasina, 1992, p. 124). Through the internalization of these principles via the cultural narratives, individual and communities construct meaningful worldviews, sustain social cohesion and adapt to evolving realities while staying rooted to their heritage.

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