

# The Role of Ao Women in Church and Society

MOANARO IMCHEN JAMIR\*

**T**he Aos are one of the major tribes of Nagaland. Their land is located in the north-eastern part of Nagaland. Mokokchung is the headquarters of the Ao Tribe. The Ao area is divided into six different ranges and the people speak two main languages, namely Mongsen and Chongli.<sup>1</sup>

According to tradition the Aos came out of the stone, Longterok (six stones) near Chungliyimti, in the Sangtam area of Tuensang district. The Aos lived in Chungliyimti for four generations and later migrated to their present land.<sup>2</sup> From the land of Chungliyimti up to the modern period, Aos refer to women as Sungolang (a bunch of leaves) or as Tetsur-tanur (women-children).<sup>3</sup> This is indicative of the fact that in Ao society women had been assigned a lower status than men. Thus, inspite of the fact that women constitute half of the population of Ao society and half of the membership of the Church, and their undeniable importance to both, they have been marginalised. They are treated as inferior, and this treatment has led women think this of themselves. This hinders them from full participation.

The role of women in the Church has always been defined in large measure by the traditional role of women in Ao society. The subordinate role played by them in traditional society was reflected in the role allowed to them by the men who controlled the Church. Even today the condition of women in society determines their status in the Church.

*Women and Economics:* In traditional Ao society, men and women contributed towards the economy of the family. It could be said that women contributed even more because while she worked equally with the men in the field, she also had to do work at home with which the men did not help. Household duties were seen to be the responsibility of women. In rural areas the same pattern continues to exist. In addition many rural women are involved in selling vegetables, handicrafts and keeping shops. In these ways they contribute to the maintenance of the family.

Today many women are employed in government services. A few women are taking part as administrators both at the national and

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\*Mrs. M.I. Jamir teaches History of Christianity at Eastern Theological College, Jorhat.

state level. This reflects a new attitude towards roles appropriate to women among women themselves as well as the public. They have begun to realise a new identity, that they can hold any position not as assigned by traditional social conventions nor by right but by the virtue of their own merit through competitive examinations.<sup>4</sup>

Teaching is the most common profession among educated women. The majority of the women employed outside their homes serve as teachers, lecturers and professors in schools and colleges, both government and private. There are also a number of women involved in medical services as nurses, doctors, compounders, etc. This sort of professional employment outside the home has no precedence in traditional society and hence represent a radical change in the status of women. A few women have become involved in business. One of the first business ventures to be taken up in recent times was that of running handloom emporiums. There are a few emporiums owned by women. The Government has also given incentives to women to start various small-scale industries, especially, handloom production, and a number of women are taking advantage of that.

*Women and Education:* In the area of education, Ao women have been discriminated. It was a prevalent belief that women were only fit for household work. It was the missionaries who took up the cause of women's education. Gradually, the importance of education for women was understood, and girls began to be sent to school. In due course, few girls began to join colleges outside the area. In the year 1939, for the first time a Naga woman earned a B.A. degree. In 1948, when the first matriculation examination was conducted in Nagaland, six girls appeared, four from Kohima and two from Mokokchung.<sup>5</sup> The Government of Nagaland has taken steps to develop facilities for the education of women. Female students are provided special stipends and various training opportunities. Girls are provided their own hostels. Knitting and weaving are provided as alternative subjects to carpentry and agriculture. Women are also permitted to appear as private candidates in HSLC/PUC degree examinations without attending the classes.<sup>6</sup> In these ways, within the last few years women's education has made progress. As a result, today a number of well educated women hold responsible positions in top managerial and executive positions. While this progress is commendable, it is regrettable that even today the literacy rate among women in Nagaland is much lower than men.<sup>7</sup>

*Women and Culture:* Despite the fact that the traditional culture gave women an inferior status, both Ao women and men are proud of their heritage. It is one of the main factors in establishing their identity. Like all cultures, each of the culture of the Naga tribes is unique. Thus the Ao Nagas have their own traditional ways of

singing, dancing, dressing, etc. Traditionally one could easily tell not only the tribe but even the clan to which an Ao woman belonged by the way she dressed. After the isolation in which the people had lived was broken following the coming of the British and Christianity, many features of the traditional culture were to change. Some of these changes were to affect the women.

Women have taken an active part in changing the traditional society through participation in village developmental programmes of various kinds. In most villages, there are women's welfare societies or women's organisations working for village development. Women are entitled to membership on the Government-sponsored village development boards in rural areas. 20% of the funds available to those boards are earmarked for developmental projects related to women. Sheds are constructed for weaving and knitting units, and some women's organisation have bought rice mills out of these funds. Social work, cleaning the village, tree plantation and other manual developmental work in the village is mostly done by women.<sup>8</sup>

Many women's organisations like the Naga Mother's Association, Watsu Rogo Mungdang, Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) women's Department, Women's Societies at the district, area and village levels raise their voices against corruption and other evils that have entered society. Commenting on the role of Watsu Rogo Mungdang, Akumla says that the Watsu Rogo Mungdang tries to keep Ao Naga culture in a better and more honourable manner. It is hoped that this association will be able to do many good things in the future.<sup>9</sup> It may be concluded that organisations like the Watsu Rogo Mungdang are seeking to preserve in the present and future the gains that have already been made for Ao society in general and women in particular, while at the same time seeking to bring about further changes. They seek to improve the society and the status of women through changes which will preserve that is valuable in the traditional Ao Christian culture but remove that which has been oppressive or due to modernisation, is leading to a new degradation of women and society. The leading role in all such efforts is taken by Christian women. In the traditional society such role would not have been possible for women.

*Women and Politics:* In traditional Ao society the highest administrative power was held by the village council. In this, women were given no role. This Patriarchal society did not provide any place for the public exercise of leadership for women, or even membership in any decision making bodies. Important decision making was not the proper role of women, who in this respect were certainly regarded as inferior to men. The male dominated society thus imposed restrictions on the role that women could play, including

their exclusion from a political role. At the village level this tradition is still continued. As K. Meru notes, "So far the legislative village panchayat, and councils, town committees remain to be represented by women".<sup>10</sup> Women are denied the right to play a political role in those bodies. Hence women are reduced to the status of second-class citizens, of a lower order than men. This has implications for the roles they are permitted to play in the social and religious institutions, as well as in the village politics.

At the state level, the situation is somewhat different, but the fact remains that all parties are dominated by male leadership. When choosing their candidates, the parties favour males. One result of this is that the women themselves tend to be apathetic about political matters, not claiming their rights in an organised way. Nevertheless few women have started to become involved in politics at this level. Among the AOs, so far only one, Chubala has contested an election. Women's role in politics is still very limited. K. Meru comments that "the small influences of women in the state leadership is in large measure due to women's own inertia. Political equality between women and men has long been admitted theoretically, but how it is done in the practical world is yet to be seen".<sup>11</sup>

The question is often asked these days as to why women cannot play an important role in politics. When examined closely, it is clear that the traditional attitude continues to influence attitudes concerning the involvement of women in politics. Politics is viewed as an area where only men can exercise power, authority and control. Modern politics in theory gives people freedom to select their own candidates, and vote for anyone of whatever sex. The votes of women are valued equally with those of men when men are seeking office. But when it comes to the selection of candidates people are reluctant to select women, let alone elect them. People still find it difficult to permit women to exercise political power. Hence the male-dominated traditions still keep women in a second-class status.

### **The Role of Women in the Church**

The document produced by the Brussels's Colloquium on women in the Church and Society includes the following:

The mentalities which we find in society, we find in the Church. In its own practice the Church helps to perpetuate sexual discrimination, for all decision making and leadership structures are controlled exclusively by male clergy. Even when women are involved in an advisory capacity on commissions and so forth, they do not participate fully in the proceedings and final decisions.... When the Church devalues women in such a way,

this not only affects the lives of its own members but also has a great impact on the perception and situation of women throughout society.<sup>12</sup>

This can certainly be applied to the situation of the Ao and other Naga Churches. In the Church, women have been excluded from the leadership roles. The traditional attitudes towards women in such roles has been maintained in the Church to a greater extent than in the society general. The role of women in the Church has been limited by male control of its administrative structure. These males seek to limit the role of women to that of child bearing and rearing, and other responsibilities in the housekeeping area. The areas in which they have been able to play leadership roles are discussed below.

### A. In the Local Church

1. *The Pastor and the associate Pastor:* The Pastor is considered the leader of the local Church. Every Church has a Pastor, while some of the large Churches have one or more associate Pastors. The Pastors are usually licensed or ordained. Only licensed or ordained persons have the authority to administer the Sacraments. Women are hardly appointed to serve as Pastor in the Ao Church. So far there are only two ordained women and one of them is serving as a licensed Pastor. Hence, the Ao women are not eligible to perform any "priestly" function except the two. So far, only one Church has given the title of associate Pastor to a woman. In fact, there, two women are so designated. One is in charge of the women's department of the Church and the other is in charge of the Christian education department.<sup>13</sup> In other Churches women perform those functions, but under different names. There they are referred to by such names, as women's leader or director of Christian education. But the women in these positions do not play a Pastoral role in relation to the congregation as a whole.

In connection with this study, a questionnaire was sent to fifty men and fifty women, asking their opinion on what roles women can play in the Church. It is interesting that among those to whom it was sent, the main opposition to having women in the role of Pastor came from men. Of the men, 25 said that they would be willing to accept a woman as a Pastor and 25 said that they would not. But among the women who responded, 48 said that they would be willing to have a woman Pastor, with only (two) 2 saying that they would not. With respect to the role of associate Pastor there was greater willingness on the part of the male respondents to having women in the position. The response from the women was identical.

It is clear that as far as those persons who were sent the questionnaire are concerned, the women themselves are prepared not only to serve as Pastors and associate Pastors but the women are prepared to have the women Pastors as well as the associate Pastors. Many of the men were not willing to have women in the top position, i.e., as Pastor, but were willing to have them serving as associate Pastors, a leadership role but one still subordinate to a male Pastor. It is interesting, however, that half of those men who responded to the questionnaire were now willing to accept a woman even as a Pastor. This reflects the extent to which Christianity has changed traditional attitudes at least among the educated respondents to the questionnaire. It is among the women themselves that the greatest changes have taken place, possibly because of their leadership experience and awareness of women's issues through the various Christian women's organisations. It is difficult to determine whether the reactions of the well educated respondents is representative of the Ao Christians population as a whole. One might expect the less well educated village people to have a more conservative attitude. Thus, even though many of the respondents would accept a woman as Pastor, only a single woman has been so appointed thus far.

2. *The Deacons and the Board of Deacons:* The other office in the local church that carries authority is that of a Deacon. Together the Deacons constitute the Board of Deacons, which is the main governing authority of the Church according to the Baptist polity. While the claim is made that deacons are appointed in accordance with the New Testament principles, Renty-Keitzar rightly observes that it is more correct to say that they are chosen in the way the members of the traditional village council used to be chosen. He goes on to say that, "if deacons are chosen as the village councillors are chosen, and if the deacons themselves exercise the power as the village councillors in the village council, that is not according to the teaching of the New Testament and the Baptist Church".<sup>14</sup> In the Ao Churches, the Board of Deacons is made up of the deacons, the Pastor, the associate Pastors, the Church secretary and the Church treasurer. It decides all matters concerning the Church's affairs. Though its decisions have to be theoretically approved by the congregation as a whole, that is simply routine.

Thus far, with the single exception of the Ao Church in Kohima, women are not represented on the Board of Deacons of Ao Churches. No woman has been elected to the office of the deacon or the Church secretary or the Church treasurer. Women are thus excluded from the decision making process in the Church, even as they were in the traditional village councils. Though women are given opportunities

to serve in other ways in the Church, they are not permitted to exercise authority or power in matters that are considered to be important. In the questionnaire referred to above, 26 of the 50 men responded that they were willing to have women as deacons and 24 were opposed. Among the women, 45 were willing to have women as deacons and 5 were not. It is interesting to note that one more man was prepared to have a woman as a deacon than was prepared to have a woman as a pastor, while the number of women willing to have women as deacons was slightly less (three) than were willing to have women as pastors. Here again it is clear that the main opposition comes from the men, even though a substantial number were prepared to have women serve in this position also. Undoubtedly, this reflects a situation in which the Baptist Board of Deacons has virtually succeeded to the role of the traditional village council, a council that was exclusively made of men.

3. *Women's Department:* Responsibility for carrying out various responsibilities in the local Church is given to different departments. Among them is always the women's department. This is the one area in the Church where women have from the beginning been able to play a leading role. The women's department of a local Church always has a woman leader, a secretary, a treasurer and other women designated for special responsibilities. There is a weekly women's fellowship meeting attended by all the women members of the Church. All the women's departments in the local Churches are affiliated with the Ao Baptist Tetsur Mungdang (ABTM) i.e., Ao Baptist Women Association. This is the organisation that brings together all the Ao Baptist women. The ABTM determines the programmes that are followed by the local women's departments. These departments have their own funds, which are often substantial with the result that they come to exercise considerable economic power. This is the one area of Church life in which women take a leading role and are free from control by men. While their sphere is limited to the women, the women's departments support work involving men (such as evangelism and theological education) and become the place where women develop public leadership experience that they had never had in the traditional society.

## **B. In the Association**

The Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang (ABAM), i.e., the Ao Baptist Church Association, brings together all the Ao Baptist Churches. The roles which have been played by women at the local Church level are reflected at the level of the Association too. Women are not given an equal share in leadership or in the higher level decision-

making bodies. This may be seen in the various elements of the ABAM structure.

*Executive Secretary/Executive Committee:* The highest administrative office in ABAM is that of the Executive Secretary. A person is elected for a term of five years in the first instance, and may be re-elected for a second five year term. Thus far, this position has always been held by men. In the response to the questionnaire only 18 of the 50 men were prepared to accept a woman as ABAM Executive Secretary, a much lower number than were prepared to accept a woman as a local Church pastor. Even among the women, only 27 thought that it would be acceptable for a woman to hold this position. This is to say that at this level nearly half of the women respondents themselves could not imagine a woman in this position. The reason given by most of the respondents is that this would be contrary to socio-cultural norms. They feel that the society is still unable to accept a woman in so prominent position of authority. Even in relation to the office of ABAM President, which is largely honorary, the response was only slightly different. Only 19 men and 33 women could accept a woman as President. The force of tradition is so strong that at this level even the women find it hard to accept the appropriateness of a person of their gender in such roles.

In ABAM, the Executive Committee is the highest authority comparable to the Board of Deacons at the local Church level. It is the highest decision making body that decides all important matters, acting on the proposals made by subordinate bodies. For many years women were not included in this body. Only during the period when Noksangla was women's secretary (1968-73) were women first given a chance to belong to it.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the representation is only token. Even today only two women serve on the Executive in addition to the ABTM Secretary who attends ex-officio. This despite the fact that women form half of the Church membership. It is one more example of how at the levels that exercise authority and power, women are excluded by male dominated Church.

*Women's Association:* As mentioned earlier, the Women's Association is known as the Ao Baptist Tetsur Mungdang (ABTM). It was formed in 1944 because of a felt need. The women felt that they needed an organisation to protect their position and give them opportunities of ministry that were otherwise denied them in a male dominated society Church. As Chubala,<sup>16</sup> a former leader puts it: "their authority was always rejected as long as they were under the leadership of men and they would not give their own leadership". The ABTM brings together all the local Church women's fellowships. It has a Secretary and two evangelists who are women.



The Women's Association provided Ao women roles that they never had in the traditional society. Never before were there specific organisations in which women could exercise leadership outside of the household. As it developed, provided women with an opportunity to exercise leadership roles at a level even above that of the village. At best within women's circles they came to exercise authority and wield power in a way that had never happened before. So extensive are the ministries carried out by the Women's Association that it can almost be described as a parallel Church structure - a women's Church structure alongside the male dominated Church structure. That the ABTM virtually runs a Church programme is evident from its activities - Mission and Evangelism, Outreach beyond Nagaland, Child Evangelism, Literature, Contribution of theologically trained women etc.

### *Issue of Women*

From the above discussion it is obvious that there have been a number of ways in which women's status has improved and they have assumed leadership roles beyond the traditional roles in the household. However, the Patriarchal nature of the Ao society continues to have its influence in preventing them from achieving full equality with men. This has given rise to the issue of women in the Church and ministry in a stronger nature. As we know, the issue of women in the Church is no longer a new issue. Today most people are aware of it. When examined one finds that the reaction to the issue represents a conflict between traditionalism and modernism. This issue was not raised so long as the women were willing to accept the subordinate position traditionally assigned to them. But under the impact of modernization, including the first important instrument of modernization, Christianity, women became aware of the inadequacy of the role traditionally assigned to them. Theologically trained women, of which there began to be an increasingly larger number, became aware of those modern theological trends that stress the equality of both sexes before God. If both women and men are one in Christ spiritually, then it became more difficult for women to accept a subordinate role in the Church.

The new theological awareness coupled with a changing world in which new role models for women began to be available made it increasingly difficult for at least well educated Ao women to accept the traditional roles assigned to them in both the society and the Church. A number of issues began to be raised concerning status and participation. In the Church, more women were feeling that

they were called by God into the ministry, and more and more women were seeking and being granted enrolment in the theological colleges.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the number of women students enrolled in the theological colleges of the North East exceeds that of the similar institutions in other parts of the country. Actually, for a number of years there were large numbers of women both from the Ao and the neighbouring tribes enrolled in the Impur Bible school, even as today there are increasingly large numbers in Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, and Clark Theological College in the Ao area. At present there are 34 Ao women (30 B.D. and 4 B.Th.) studying at Eastern Theological College, Jorhat. Increasingly large numbers of women enrolling in theological institutions indicate an unwillingness on the part of Christian women to accept traditional roles.

The male domination of the Church is nowhere more evident than in the large convention and association meetings. The leadership roles are held by men. Occasionally women are appointed as assistants, but no more. They are permitted to preach in small groups, but not in the large meetings. Despite the many advances that women have made, the majority of men still seem to think that their proper place is doing household work. This despite the fact that is commonly recognised, that the strength of the Church lies in the women. As a woman evangelist put it, "In a Church where the women's group is strong, there the Church is strong. In a Church where the women's group is weak, the Church is weak".<sup>18</sup>

*Factors limiting the Ministry of women:* When examined carefully, the subordinate place of women in the Church is found to be due to several factors, like Biblical, traditional and cultural.

*Misinterpretation of the Scripture:* Whenever the question of the ministry of women is discussed, the scripture is used to justify their exclusion from the leadership roles. Argument both for and against the ordination of women, for instance are taken from the Bible. This makes it necessary for the Ao Churches to critically examine the way in which they use the Bible. There is always a tendency to take a few verses out of context, and ignore other verses that do not support the position they want to take.

The Bible is often used to justify the traditional Ao subordination of women. Many Ao men often quote certain New Testament texts to suit their own purposes. Those cited frequently are I Corinthians 11:3ff., 14:33ff., Galatians 3:28 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. No effort is made to understand the historical context within which those verses were first written nor to understand their real meaning. One is left with the impression that Ao men are not so much concerned with seeking guidance of the Bible, as they are with using the Bible to

justify a position that they have arrived at for other reasons. However even the Biblical arguments are not used as frequently now as formerly in justifying a secondary role for women.

*Traditional Attitudes:* Traditional attitudes are almost certainly more important in determining male (and female) attitudes towards the appropriate role of women than a concern for Biblical models. Traditionally men dominated the public decision making process in the village. This attitude continues in the Church with men similarly opposing the involvement of women in decision making. Thus women do not serve on the Board of Deacons which is the main administrative body of the local Church and is responsible for Church property. Similarly at the ABAM level, only two women with voting rights represent half the membership of the Churches on the Executive Committee.

*Cultural Context:* The traditional subordination of women in leadership roles is justified on the grounds that such a position reflects the authentic culture of the Ao people. Giving women non-traditional roles would subvert that culture. Whenever the role of women in ministry is discussed among the Aos, the cultural argument is advanced as the primary one. This rather than Biblical arguments is now the approach most frequently used. Men and even some women say, "We have nothing against women's participation in the top levels of decision making, but our culture will not accept a woman as the leader of the whole Church or association".<sup>19</sup> This argument ignores the fact that many aspects of the traditional culture have already changed, including changes in the roles of women in many spheres of life and even at some levels in the Church, or that all cultures are dynamic. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that even the cultural argument is simply a way of perpetuation patriarchy.

*Impact of an Inferiority Complex:* One of the consequences of a patriarchal culture is that it not only convinces men that they are superior, but also convinces women themselves that they are inferior. It seems that Ao women are so accustomed to a socio-cultural set up in which they are assigned an inferior position that they simply accept it as right and feel comfortable with it. Many women prefer to be where they are, and are not willing to come forward to take up leadership roles. They themselves are made to feel that they are not capable of doing so. In response to the question about whether or not a women could be the Executive secretary of ABAM, 23 out of 50 women respondents said "no". Similarly when asked about the opinion on ordination, many women with whom the writer spoke expressed the opinion that they didn't mind fighting for the right of other women to be ordained but they themselves did not want to be.

Thus the women themselves seem unwilling to take up the roles that they did not have traditionally.

One gets the impression that men also have something of an inferiority complex which has a bearing on their attitude towards women in ministry. When interviewed by the writer, some of the men said that they thought other men opposed the ministry of women because they were afraid that women would do better than men if given the chance. This would make them look inferior to women. They were afraid of a reversal of the traditional situation in which women looked inferior to men. They seek to prevent this from happening by not allowing women equal participation in the ministry.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Through this study, it is seen that though there has been some progress in the status of women in both the Ao Society and the Ao Church, attitudes towards women continue to be influenced by the traditional Socio-Cultural ideas. It is also seen that the central role in raising the status of women has been played by the ABTM. The men who controlled and continue to control the Church maintained traditional attitudes which viewed women as inferior. They therefore thought that only inferior roles were appropriate for them. In the Church they thought that it was right for women to be kept subordinate to themselves with respect to leadership and decision-making roles. In this context it has been shown how it was the women themselves who took the initiative in creating new roles for themselves.

The main instruments through which they worked were the local women's fellowships and the gathering together of those fellowships at the central level in the women's Association. In these fellowships and the association, they gained experience in leadership and decision-making roles, roles that were not traditional for women outside the home and which were denied to them in the structure of the Church. The women's Association gradually developed expanding its role and activities in most of the areas in which the Church was involved. In doing so, it became a parallel Church, a women's Church.

In the light of the concern with women's issue that is being shown in both the Church and the society these days, and in light of the findings of this study, it is clear that it is necessary for the Church to re-examine and change the traditional attitudes towards women which has led to the creation of a male dominated and oriented Church. If the Church is to be restructured in such a way that discrimination against women is removed, so that the community of

believers, composed of both women and men, can live in love and harmony with one another, and can thus be more effective agents of God's mission in the world. It is necessary to recognize that the origin of the problem lies in the continuance of the traditional socio-cultural attitudes rather than in theological or biblical questions. Just as man was not complete when created until joined by a woman, so also the present social and ecclesiastical leadership will not be whole until women take their rightful place alongside men in the ministry and are given the freedom to exercise their skills and gifts to the fullest.

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