
GOD - SELF - WORLD CONTINUUM IN TRIBAL RELIGION

S a s h i n u n g l a

Introduction

In this paper, I draw on the Tribal religions in order to show that religion does not have to be a site of domination and exclusion (human or non-humans). Much of what is analysed in this paper is drawn primarily from my research in India's Northeastern region:¹ my lived-experience, personal visits, discussions with tribal elders in the region. I do not offer an elaborate introduction on the indigenous tribes and cultures of Northeast India, as the literature is already replete. Nor is this a systematic account of the minutiae of tribal religions. My analysis focusses primarily on the god-self-world continuum within a tribal paradigm and looks at the ethical implications of various metaphysical commitments that it instructs.

The partial and exclusionary model of spirituality conveyed by many dominant religious traditions² divides the universe into radical realms that exclude the in-between and border spaces that connect multiple, often overlapping and contradictory realms. Such models obliterate

¹ It is not to suggest that Northeast tribal groups are homogeneous, but it is reasonable to say that there are broad similarities between all tribal systems of thought. The terms "Northeast" & "Tribal" are colonial and political concepts. The region is linked to the rest of the country by a narrow land corridor and shares only two percent of its boundary with India while the other ninety-eight percent is shared with the international borders of Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

² The dualistic tradition leads to the problem of "us and them." Monistic thought is hard to reconcile with the fact that there are distinct things that are "separate" from each other.

possibilities for respect and communication between two different categories by either treating all things as one and the same or by treating one category as higher or more sacred, while the other is treated as incommensurable with the different “others.” Tribal spirituality supports the belief that all things stem from the same source and are related as parts of a greater whole. However, it also celebrates and respects individuality and, furthermore, chooses to learn from individuality rather than stress a belief that one should try to blend in and lose one’s “ego” to be fulfilled. Further, unlike Aristotelian radical binarism (“true,” or “false”), tribal conceptual frameworks express ontological nebulosity: it does not exclude the in-between (“neither” or “sort of”); and recognises that more than two values can be accounted for, without leading to radical exclusion or contradiction. Similarly, it is not limited by the dualistic structure of otherness and negation. To quote Mamang Dai, renowned Adi³ poet and novelist, whose home state is Arunachal Pradesh:

In our language, the language of the Adis, the word ‘pensam’ means ‘in- between.’ It suggests the middle, or middle ground ... where anything can happen and everything can be lived ...⁴

In Adi language and culture, the word “pensam” also refers to the “hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows.”⁵ But it may also be interpreted as a course of action or perspective that is between two extremes or categories – instructing an earth oriented vision of the world / life that embraces complexity. Tribal philosophy considers most things to exist on a continuum rather than being made up of absolute wholes. It also takes into account the apparent “irrationality” that everything can be separate and distinct and yet be One at the same time. By not excluding the in-between proposition and by accepting the probability that there can be a variety of different standards and reasoning for determining truth, it opens up the possibility that one can have knowledge and truths that are not familiar to or possessed by others. Thus, knowing the limits of one’s own knowledge and being

³ The Adi (also known as Abor) are a major collective tribe in the State of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁴ Mamang Dai, *The Legends of Pensam* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006), vii.

⁵ Dai, *The Legends of Pensam*.

willing to share and listen to what's shared are integral to supporting such a principle.

The idea that society and nature are interrelated but are separate domains of reality is a central precept of modernity. Australian environmental philosopher Val Plumwood uses the expression "hyperseparation" to describe the extreme differentiation between human beings and other living things, where humans and "nature" are separated by a radical discontinuity.⁶ For many people, nature is irrelevant to human flourishing, or even an impediment. For instance, in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells his interlocutor that nature is not his teacher and that he values only the knowledge of people in cities.⁷ This approach is vastly different from that of the tribespeople, who look at nature as a whole, as a great "book" to be read intelligently by humans. Similarly, in the tribal system of thought,⁸ subjectivity in the form of sentience and agency is not solely a human prerogative but is located throughout all species and across every elemental category.

The Meta-Ethics of Tribal Spirituality

In tribal religion, everything is spiritually alive and interconnected through their genealogical myths and its associated events and practices. For instance, origin myths, recorded in the *Tarnunger otsu* (Tale of the ancestors),⁹ provides important details about the character of cosmogenesis as the Aos, one of the tribal communities in the state of Nagaland, understood it. The Ao spiritual framework is *Lung trok*, the Ao metaphysical explanation of origin – the fundamental principle

⁶ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 123–142.

⁷ Plato, »Phaedrus,« trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co, Inc., 1997), 510.

⁸ Tribal conceptions of nature vary greatly as each ethnic group has its particular way to conceive nature and understand the relations established with it. However, what is common among all of them is that the "natural world" is, above all, a wide network of inter-relations between and among agents.

⁹ Translation is my own.

of order. Its extended phrase *Lung trok ko voker*¹⁰ is literally translated as: “emerged from the six stones,” but the more accurate translation is “originating from eternity.” It refers to the mythical age of origin, the primordial time of beginning, the time of ancestors which gives meaning and significance to all that follows. I briefly characterise the nature of the *Lung trok*, to contextualise the moral obligations which are contingent upon it. The Aos have an interesting myth connected with their ancestral origin in an ancient place called Chungliyimti. According to the myth, the Aos “originated” out of stones at Chungliyimti, tracing all the six major clans as having “emerged” from six stones, called *Long trok* – symbolising six chiefs or ancestors.

In the creation myths of many tribal communities of India’s North-east, they consider themselves to be “children” of the earth. According to Nagaland’s Chang tribe’s legend, human existence on earth started when human emerged from a big hole in the earth.¹¹ Tribal cosmogonies, by “relating” them to nature – natural elements, thereby establish a connection to the land in the very nature of their being. I think that the most important point about the origin myths for philosophical purposes is that it makes very clear that what happens to exist now is an expression of a specific configuration of the divine – each piece/element is a special configuration in a cosmic order. For the purpose of this study, I am interested in the spiritual narrative of the origin stories (not the literal truth of their content) – the spiritual connectedness and bonds between the people and the land that it instructs.

Creation narratives also relate humans directly to other creatures and elements of nature, affirming the belief that they are the progeny of the same ancestors and therefore, are the same being: they are their kin, and some are their totems. The tribal totemic system demarcates a world of “difference,” and at the same time weaves patterns that connect particular human groups with particular non-human species and elements, such as an animal, plant or spirit-being – generating inter-species/cross-elemental consubstantial kindreds. For instance, there is a

¹⁰ It should be noted that there are problems in translating this phrase into English. This is not the only interpretation; it is, however, the most central.

¹¹ *Folk Tales from Nagaland: Part 1 & 2*, (Kohima: Directorate of Art and Culture, Nagaland, 1989), 151.

myth among many tribal communities in India's Northeast, including the Aos of Nagaland that in the beginning tiger, man and spirit-being were brothers who all lived together. Although these three brothers developed characteristics different from each other, they were potentially the same and formed one community in the interrelated web of creation. It is this "conversational" connection and the sense of adaptivity of relationships between humans and their non-human kin, and the natural elements, which grounds tribal morality. In this conceptual framework, reality is seen as a web of intimate ontological relationships that cross-cut difference – human, other species and all elements of nature. Thus, the Tribal metaphysics of nature and life, of the world and human, unites one with nature's activities and species in a bond of a mutual cycle of life-giving continuity and do not allow the fragmentation of experience into mutually exclusive realms.

These genealogical affiliations are not only crucial in understanding tribal spirituality and their understanding of the universe, but also of the nature-society relations in ontological and epistemological terms. There are moral imperatives between individuals (and communities) and the natural world because of their ontological connectedness—that is, a connection inherent in the nature of their being. The precise term to describe such a connection is *ecological connectionality* (different from the dyadic model of relation). These genealogical connections are ethical connections—expressed as *sobaliba* (wisdom)¹² in the Ao language. Such a portrayal of nature in a broader canvass reaffirms the tribespeople's perception of nature not merely as a passive recipient of human actions, but as active participants in the whole web of relationships.¹³

¹² The translation is my own. It should be noted that there are problems in translating this term into English. *Sobaliba* – the core of the Ao people's sustaining principle is encoded and instituted in the Ao system of rules and regulations that holds the world/society together. It teaches how the world's interdependence results in an inter-responsibility. For a slightly different interpretation of the concept *Sobaliba*, see Sashinungla, "Exploring Ao Values and Ethics," in *Ethics and Culture: Some Indian Reflections*, ed. I. Sanyal and Sashinungla (New Delhi: Decent Books, 2010), 231–242.

¹³ One Ao origin story, for instance, tells of a time when rice grew without a husk but humans interfered with disastrous results. One day Yarila and her sister decided to pound the rice to make it even whiter than it was before. Nature resented this scorning of her gifts, and since then rice has always grown with a husk and must be laboriously pounded before it can be eaten. See J. P. Mills, *The Ao-Nagas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 223.

Just as humans can alter the world, the world can act on and alter us. In this respect, the universe is personal – that is, having personality and particularity. In the tribal paradigm, the universe is “alive” – a hugely dynamic entity to be entered into a dialogue with, respected and establish a reciprocal relationship with.

God-Self-World Continuum

Most dominant religious traditions strongly focus on human beings and their relation with God as the most important element. However, in the tribal traditions “creation” is the central point of reference in understanding all reality. It is neither human-centric nor god-centric. Rather, together with god, humans and the world constitutes a “cosmic web” of relationships in which the truth is to be lived with all others. According to the Khasi religion: in the cosmic web of relationships, humans are placed in-between U Blei (Supreme Being) and Ka meiramew (mother earth). U Blei creates all things, Ka meiramew nourishes and sustains them and humans complete them. Their earth-centred approach to reality is based on the fundamental premise that human (culture) is a part of the physical world having an inalienable and mutual interaction between them, thereby, relationships characterised by both mutual respect and mutual use. Tribal spirituality, thus expands the concept of “nature” including in it the entire ecosphere unlike other religious and scientific traditions where nature/the world has a limited sense, only for the social sphere.

For instance, the Aos do not think of “being” as the fundamental principle of reality but rather that the fundamental principle of reality consists in creation. This kind of conception is different from Aristotle’s characterisation of what is real (eternally true). Aristotle understands science as a body of knowledge that seeks the eternally true, whereas, the tribespeople understand the character of reality as it is given is not eternal. This account of tribal reality needs to be distinguished from a naturalist’s position as the latter does not require any specific sort of religious commitment. *Long trok* may be taken as the basic character of reality in the Aos’ account, but it never loses its connection with divinity. Hence, their position appears to be thoroughly theological.

This centrality of creation is supported variously, though one finds it most clearly in the tribal cosmological myths – which relates the character of the cosmos and the origin of human beings. For instance, one Tangkhul creation myth¹⁴ tells of a great convention called by the Kasa Akhava (the Supreme God), inviting the opinion of all creatures to determine the duration of day and night. This image of the assembly of all creatures: involving consultation, search for order and consensus, tracing the eldest, words of wisdom from Kasa Akhava suggests that all are constituents of respect and rights. The story basically describes the character of the Supreme Being, the place of humans and all creatures – a cosmic order, characterised by mutual respect and interdependence.

Appearing in an Ao song of philosophical lyric, the Aos' version reads in part as follows:¹⁵

Oh having emerged from the six stones,
 The day all birds congregated
 Owl proclaimed, if there is light, let it always be day; If there is darkness,
 let it always be night
 Amidst the hullabaloo,
 To the relief of all, the hummingbird said, let light and dark coexist; let
 night follow day and day follow night. [...]

Ancestors practiced the ancient religion of mighty rocks and (sacred)
 woods

In hope the generations follow that path of the great God

All gathered at the village meeting place at Chungliyimti,¹⁶
 And decided to take the advice of Ongangla¹⁷

Ongangla directed us to worship new water and perform ceremonial rites
 at the new village site.

¹⁴ R. Luikham, *Folklores and Tales of the Nagas* (New Delhi: Immanuel Publisher, 1983), 67.

¹⁵ The translation is my own. It should be noted that there are problems in translating these verses into English.

¹⁶ Ancient place of the Ao people.

¹⁷ An Ao diviner who foretells the future. She is also perceived to be the wife of *Meyutsüngba* (chief/god of righteousness).

What this part of the philosophical lyric shows is the Aos seek to follow the path of the great god of earth-centred religion. The reference of the *Long trok ko voker* (the Ao metaphysical explanation of origin, the fundamental principle of order) describes that god-human-earth can only be meaningfully and fully conceived together as a whole; further suggesting that the Divine is not seen as totalitarian. The text indicates that “wisdom” and the upkeep of the cosmic order is not the exclusive domain of the humans alone (the indication is also clear in the Tangkhul’s creation story above). This understanding is in marked difference to the idea of biblical stewardship (about human’s exercising God-given dominion over His creation) or to the approach of “ecological rationality,” where the emphasis is on the role of the human being’s rationality in preserving the environment.¹⁸ In contrast, tribal spirituality works with multiple, recursive connections. The text also specifies that there is one Supreme Being, one principle of reality, identified in the singular – though it has a fundamentally dualising, connective aspect, and metaphorically “dwells” *in* water and *through* Ongangla – that it is all of reality.¹⁹ In this sense, the traditional Aos are “pantheists,” for they hold that the divine pervades all things and is expressed through all of existence.

Ao philosophical lyrics and oral poetics of the pre-conquest period (and before Christianity), indicate that all the “gods” were taken to be a single being. The Aos did not believe in a pantheon of gods, but treated all as mere aspects of a single Supreme Being. The Aos refer to the Supreme Being as Lijaba: literally translated as, “earth” (*Li*) and “indwell” (*jaba*). It means “the one who indwells the earth.” The word

¹⁸ Rational ecologist, John S. Dryzek contends that human beings are to find out a mechanism to preserve the ecosystem, it is their rationality that would determine the nature and scope of this mechanism. See John S. Dryzek, *Rational Ecology: Environment and Political Economy* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987), 38–64.

¹⁹ For the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh for instance, the *Donyi* (sun) and the *Polo* (moon) are the two “eyes” of the *Sedi-Melo*, the Supreme Being manifested in physical forms. Among the forces of nature, it is the duality of sun-moon, *Donyi-Polo* who is regarded as most powerful. An Adi invocation to *Donyi-Polo* illustrates the dualising, connective character of the Supreme Being very well. It goes in part: “You are the greatest of all. You are above all. You see all. [...] At night you watch the world of the dead. In the day, from the world below ... You look in every side; you know everything.” See Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North East Frontier of India* (Shillong: North East Frontier Agency, 1959), 211.

jaba also means “real” or “existence,” therefore, Lijaba could also be translated as, “the real earth” or “embedded being.” Consistent with their pantheistic outlook, Lijaba is existence for the Aos. The name is unambiguous as it directly indicates that Lijaba is omnipresent, always near. This is true because Lijaba not only pervades all things, but self-expresses as everything.²⁰

The same being is addressed as Longkitsüngba / Aningsüngba (Sky Chief or the Sun-Moon God) in relation to elements/forces of nature and seasons. The name *Tiaba* (Chief of Providence) is used in relation to man’s earthly fortune – the God of Life and Death, blessings and misfortunes, also called Meyutsüngba (Chief of Righteousness) in relation to moral and ethical judgment in life and after death. Meyutsüngba is considered the *gateway* between the world of the dead and the living – who judges everyone according to their deeds on earth. They are all addressed as Lijaba, the one Supreme Being, in relation to the creation of the earth and everything therein. O. Alem, an Ao theologian wrote:

Lijaba expresses the mundane nature of God, while Longkitsungba expresses the transcendence of God, and Meyutsungba expresses the omnipresent nature of God. [...] His presence is both simultaneously transcendent and immanent.²¹

The above descriptions largely highlight that the basic principle of reality is characterised by a kind of reciprocal duality: man and nature, day and night, life and death, male and female,²² material and spiritual, transcendence and immanence, creation and destruction, sky (heaven) and earth, and so on. To my mind, what is most significant about the dualising, reciprocal character of reality (Lijaba) is that it is a principle that exists as a connecting relation. Therefore, a relationship of reciprocity is established across categories of meaning/experience, never losing sight of an ultimate wholeness. The pattern that thus emerges is that

²⁰ Ao legends describe that while the Aos were at *Chungliyimti* (an ancient Ao place), Lijaba, the Supreme Being dined and stayed (in disguise) at the home of the villagers.

²¹ O. Alem, *Tsungremology* (Mokokchung: Clark Theological College, 1994), 35.

²² The Supreme Being is identified as male but has attributes described as “feminine.”

Lijaba only exists qua creation as reality, and Lijaba qua the *Long trok* is the cosmos.

Since only a transient account of reality such as Lijaba is possible (unlike the kind of eternal knowledge, much less “rational” knowledge described by Aristotle’s *episteme*), the Aos’ highest metaphysical concepts are stated poetically, in metaphors and not in treatise form. This does not mean that abstraction is absent in tribal philosophy but that abstraction is insufficient for explaining a whole range of questions that affect one’s experience of the Good. In tribal thought, the kind of reasoning employed takes into account all aspects of interactions of humans *in* and *of* “nature.” Therefore, pure abstraction has only a small role in tribal philosophy. By ascribing to a connectional metaphysics,²³ their concepts of truth/good are different from how Plato idealised abstraction and a life free of material restraints and distractions. In tribal thought, good/truth is not only an abstract concept, but a way of living that comes out of meaningful, reciprocal relationships with the entire environmental complex that makes life possible. Their commitment to the interdependence of different categories undermines the way in which western sciences formulated man/nature relationship within the separation/domination model. The principle that everything is connected suggests that truth is an effect of action rather than of formal propositions. As such, truth is not something figured out abstractly in the mind alone; it emerges under a certain cosmological configuration that can only be fully understood in a connectional and ethical context.

Lijaba is the basic name for the fundamental principle of reality. But reality is always perceived / revealed under a certain cosmological configuration. This suggests that Lijaba is not a singular being who might be the focal point of perception. It simply means nothing in nature can exhaustively represent it. The main point here is that Lijaba is not directly perceptible, since he is everywhere, i.e., Lijaba is imperceptibly everywhere. Therefore, the Aos hold a metaphysically quasi-realist view, since they did not deny that in some sense we could know the cosmic order in which we live, but they did deny that this cosmic order was the

²³ As I have shown, tribal creation narratives are a manifestation of a broader metaphysics of ecological connectivity.

basic character of reality itself. Wisdom (*sobaliba*),²⁴ therefore, for the Aos consists in grasping the limits of our knowledge and understanding the way things are through their changes, while giving it the best possible (adequate) expression one can in connectional (reciprocal) existence. This entails that even if the Aos consider wisdom to be the best sort of knowledge, what makes it best is not because it is guaranteed by the seal of eternity.

As the Supreme Being, in the singular, the word Lijaba simply means “real” and “true” being or “embedded being” and “grounded being.” But in its broader sense, it came to be used as the term for “truth” and “reality.” Lijaba, which is often translated as “God,” is hardly a personal god. Lijaba is rather more like a universal energy which is formed into our specific cosmos for a time. It means that the Aos did not think of a personal god as the fundamental source of reality but rather argued for a view that recognised a divinity to be present in all features of the world. If everything is inspired by a single/common reality, then self-realisation and the realisation of the other (which includes “nature”) are co-extensive. Therefore, to subservice one category is not only to compromise the creative possibilities of the other but also to impoverish one’s own.

Conclusion

I want to reiterate that tribal spirituality instructs the kind of sensibility or attentiveness which is prevalent among many tribes of India, as elsewhere in the world – a sense of “oneness” and connectedness with each other and every object of creation. This view of tribal sensibility must be distinguished from the modernist idea of “ecological humanism,” a theoretical coinage to “humanise” ecology and to give humanist dimensions to ecology. Tribal eco-sensibility is also different from the kind of process where the emphasis is on gaining self-knowledge that subsumes the knowledge of the world. The kind of earth-centred spi-

²⁴ To know both epistemically and by acquaintance. Wisdom is understood in connection to other sorts of knowledge in the tribal understanding. However, it is important to note that the Aos distinguish wisdom from other sorts of knowledge.

rituality that tribal religion imparts does not insist on detachment or renunciation of self from the world – as in their vision, the spiritual is not opposed to the material. Neither does it quest its union with the absolute (mystic’s way of life) nor propose a kind of “fusion” with nature, to eclipse all difference for a greater whole (Deep ecology). Rather it is a sensibility to live *responsibly*²⁵ which follows from their cosmological vision that all “life” is sacred. This makes possible communication and love for the other without undermining the reality of the other. Tribal legends characterise animals and other natural elements and forces as beings capable of inspiring respect or disfavour, yet, recognise that each is a different species, though members of the same biotic community. Therefore, one must respect the members both separately (and individually) and together (and collectively).

The question of how to co-exist together and to live sustainably is the most important of our time. Tribal cosmic-centred theology, by emphasising the web of vital relationships embedded in all things – its vision of the world, reminds one that all things and creations on earth share a common destiny. The dependency of humanity on the natural world and the exigency to adhere to an order that maintains its earth-oriented balance is lucid in tribal thought.²⁶ If philosophers are committed to overcoming the problems of binary dualisms that privilege one form of life or reality over others, then they must become involved in the making and remaking of the world by adopting respectful (and non-exclusionary) methods of philosophical engagement in their work. Moreover, the unilineal concept of religion and history needs to be tempered by an earth-centred spirituality. This means we need to re-conceptualise our long-standing comprehension of the god, human,

²⁵ The ideal of living *responsibly* involves doing the right thing by fellow human beings, community, God, Mother Earth, ancestors, as well as future generations.

²⁶ A Tangkhul myth illustrates this point well. The story goes like this: A scene was created by a hungry fox disturbing the peaceful sleep of the fellow creatures at night. He was seated on a tree enjoying a walnut. By mistake a walnut fell out from his hands and hit the crab lying below. The crab filled with fury destroyed the nest of the giant ants, who in turn, stung a sleeping wild boar. The agonised boar went wild and destroyed the banana trees. This disturbed the tiny bat sleeping peacefully on the leaf of the banana. The angry bat sped about wildly and landed in the nostril of a sleeping elephant. The agitated elephant went wild resulting in the death of a man. (Luikham, *Folklores and Tales of the Nagas*, 91.)

and the “nature” relation in a different, fresh way. Humankind needs to reconnect with nature, not relating to it, but being in nature and being part of it. One should look for other sources of knowledge for bridging and nearing opposite phenomena, harmonisation of spiritual and material experiences, reconciliation of the transcendent and immanent plans. In tribal spirituality I think we have a powerful conceptual alternative towards this.

B i b l i o g r a p h y

- Alem, O. *Tsungremology*. Mokokchung: Clark Theological College, 1994.
- Elwin, Verrier. *Myths of the North East Frontier of India*. Shillong: North East Frontier Agency, 1959.
- Dai, Mamang. *The Legends of Pensam*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006.
- Dryzek, John S. *Rational Ecology: Environment and Political Economy*. New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987.
- Folk Tales from Nagaland: Part 1 & 2*. Kohima: Directorate of Art and Culture, Nagaland, 1989.
- Luikham, R. *Folklores and Tales of the Nagas*. New Delhi: Immanuel Publisher, 1983.
- Mills, J. P. *The Ao-Nagas*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Plato. »Phaedrus.« Translated by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, 506–556. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1997.
- Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Sashinungla. “Exploring Ao Values and Ethics.” In *Ethics and Culture: Some Indian Reflections*, edited by I. Sanyal and Sashinungla, 231–242. New Delhi: Decent Books, 2010.