THE MAO NAGAS

Mao Naga himself, Mr. Paul Lokho writes about the Mao Naga tribe, a Naga sub-tribe, who inhabit the northern hills of Manipur. He gives us an insight into their cultural traditions and their rich heritage. Describing their rituals and festivals, their ceremonies and rites of passage, Mr. Lokho, takes us on a journey to the world of the Mao Nagas.

Skillfully organized for survival and vivaciously creative in their cultural life, the Mao tribes are found on the northern hills of Manipur in North-east India. Their number is near about a lakh. The Maos are one of the many Naga sub-tribes. Settled agriculturists, they dwell on hilltops and cultivate the hill-slopes, neatly converting them into terraced fields. Their villages and hamlets are expressive of an independent nature and closely-knit society. They are a princely tribe belonging to the Mongolian stock. Tested for centuries by the difficult hilly terrains, the Mao tribes have learnt to live in tune with nature and they are able to read the designs of nature, which is like an open book to them. Their invincible and indomitable spirit is attributed to their sportive struggle to overcome the hardships of life brought about by nature itself.

As in the case of other neighbouring communities, there are innumerable folk tales and folklore which speak of the Maos as one of the headhunting tribes in the medieval periods. The community has now evolved into a semi-modern society. The traditional cultural aspects of the tribe have started to disappear. The influence of other cultures has made a remarkable dent on the younger generation. Given below is a brief sketch of the traditional practices and institutions.

Rites of Passage:

For the Maos, when a child is born, there are a series of rites and ceremonies, some of them depending on the sex of the child. In the case of the male child, the ceremonies are much more elaborate, lavish and even complicated. On the eighth day, the child is given a name and ceremoniously introduced to the light of the day. For a male child, a shield made of barka of a particular tree and a spear is to be carried, together with a live charcoal. The master of ceremonies, along with the parents of the child and together with the shield and spear lead the child by the hand to the main door of the house. His name is called and the child is asked to receive the light. Thenceforth the child is known by its given name. For the girl-child a simpler ceremony is done in which the parents take the child to the door after sunrise and introduce her to light.

On the sixteenth day the child is initiated into the agricultural practice of the community. The child is carried by the mother on her side, while she also carries the implements of 'work in a basket on her back. They may be accompanied by the father or by some children. The implements consist of a spade, a knife, a few feathers of a cock, and some sprigs of indigo plants and a jar of wine. They are taken to some place outside the village and the mother digs a patch of the ground and leading the hand of the child, plants the feathers and the plants. She also spills a little wine around the plant on the ground. Then she collects two pebbles of stones and carries them back home. The pebbles are then put in the crib of the baby for a while.

After eight weeks, the child is introduced to the food of the community. At dawn, the mother goes to fetch spring water with which she anoints the child on the forehead. She also cooks rice and chicken with the water and before anyone else tastes the food; a small portion of the best part is offered to God at the hearth. Then the mother would take a bit of meat and rice and crushing them together would anoint the forehead, mouth and breast of the child pronouncing a blessing on the child. Then, before any member of the family partake of the meat, a plateful of rice and meat is offered to an elderly person of good character asking for his or her blessing on the child.

Within a few months, the child's ears are pierced to make holes for earrings. An old man performs the piercing ceremoniously. A bamboo stick sharpened skillfully and hardened over a flame is used for the piercing. The master of the ceremony is given a log of firewood as remuneration for the job.

At the end of the first year during the 'Salemi Festival', a male child is given initiation into community life. The ceremony is called 'Macha Kozi'. The ceremony introduces a child into his friends' circle by calling all male young children of the neighbourhood to take part in the festive ceremony. The feast lasts for two full days. On such days, females are untouchable and are excluded from the festivities. Cooking is also done separately, at different ovens though in the same house. For the ceremony, all
crockery, wood, water, fire etc. have to be new. Utensils like pots, platoe, ogone etc. are made of clay or wood or bamboo. No steel or aluminium articles are used for the occasion. Fire is also newly lit in the primitive style by the friction method with a bamboo string rubbed vigorously against a dry wood by pulling up and down the bamboo holding leaves of trees and tresss crushed into wool torm. Water is carried from springs in small, hollow, cylindrical bamboo piccoo. No pond or lake water is supposed to be used. The feast is marked by an ablation of all the participants from a spring source, which is to be completed before sunrise, and all the participants carry water to the house of the celebrant. The most important aspect is the killing of dozens of full-grown cocks for the meat. No other meat is allowed. On this auspicious day, the participants have to keep themselves pure and well disciplined. A disciplinarian is appointed to see that the participants don’t eat and drink anything outside the house of the celebrant and that they don’t fight or quarrel. Rites are performed to decide the fortunes of the celebrant and the participants. Some bravery tests are also performed. On the concluding day, the father of the boy carries a white cock and touching the forehead of the boy, would circle around the house and call the benevolent spirits to bless the child with virtues like bravery, wealth etc. He would then enter the house backwards. With this final act, the ceremony ends.

Around the age of fourteen or fifteen or when the child reaches puberty, he or she has to enter into the dormitory. The dormitory is a place where peer groups of a neighbourhood form into a solidarity group and would sleep together in a house. The house owner shares a spacious room with the group. It is generally done by someone quite well-placed in society. Girls have their own separate dormitory in another house. The important functions of the dormitory are (1) the dormitory partners cultivate a lifelong bond and never forget each other in life. They remain bonded to one another and in times of difficulty, a person has to help and stand by the side of his or her friends; (2) as a group, they assist their families by working in each others’ fields by turn; (3) each dormitory will vie with one another to collect folktales, compose songs and they remain as busy as bees in developing and preserving the oral traditions of the community: (4) the young person is helped to socialize and to prepare to shoulder the responsibilities after their marriage. They learn social etiquette in dormitories. In Mao society, marriage is a social contract. Both the partners commit themselves to one another in close bonds. Their families are also brought closer to one another. Marriage is preceded by an engagement ceremony in which the relatives of the boy go to the house of the girl and finalize the proposal by a simple spade-exchange ceremony. Wine is to be shared in cups made of banana leaves, which are also exchanged. After the engagement, marriage takes place within a few months. The girl is taken to the boy’s house accompanied by her dormitory friends and a few distant relatives. The dormitory friends take leave after a day or two and after this, the couple lives as husband and wife. Within a year, the couple has to build their own house and separate themselves from the parental home.

It is customary for the Maos, upon the death of a person, to proclaim a genna and abstain from work for the village community. People visit the house of the deceased and express grief and sorrow by crying. A rich and important person’s death is marked by gunfire and killing of animals for distributing its meat to the entire village community. A master of ceremony is appointed who oversees the digging of the grave. The eschatology of the Maos is quite akin to some well-developed religions. They believe that there is a life after death quite like this life, where you live in colonies of people with a nuclear family system. So in the burial, many articles like knives, catapults, spears etc. are also put. Elderly people who are fond of wine are given a jar of wine buried alongside the corpse. At the end of the year, the relatives of the deceased perform a rite called ‘kro’, in which some wine is prepared and cooking is done in new pots made of clay and they are disposed of at a place outside the village, in the belief that the dead person would come and take them for their use. With this ceremony, the final rites for the dead are considered to be complete and no further rites are performed.

The festivals of Maos:

There are four major festivals of the Mao tribe within a year. The feasts are celebrated in remembrance of work and seasons. The four main festivals are:

(a) Chiljuni; (b) Saleni; (c) Onuni and (d) Chilhuni

(a) Chiljuni is a festival for commemorating the arrival of the work season in the year. It occurs early in the month of March. The most important aspect of the festival is the belief in the disappearance of the barren season (winter) and the heralding of the spring season when nature reawakens to new life and sprouts on the surface of the earth. The feast is marked with a lavish preparation of food and drink and celebration in groups.

(b) Saleni is a festival commemorating the successful transplantation of paddy. It generally falls in either July or August. The feast lasts for four days. On this occasion, the important childhood ceremony called ‘Maosa Kozii’ or initiation ceremony takes place. After the festival is over, no plantation activities can be undertaken. The festival is marked by enthusiastic display of cultural dances, mock war games and enactment of the past cultural glory.

(c) Onuni is a one-day festival during the growing season of the plants. It is a festival mainly for rallying together and praying for the proper growth of the paddy plants and other crops, for conducive climate and a good harvest. It is a festival of rejoicing in the hope that God will bless the people through a good
climate and save their crop from pests and destructive forces.

(d) Chiluthuni is the most important festival of the Mao. It lasts for five days in commemoration of the successful harvest which is just over. It occurs in December or January. The feast also brings an element of joy at having received the abundance of the yield from the earth. On this occasion, the families inaugurate the paddy barns after prayers and ceremonies. They also make bread and wine with the new rice. This festival takes place during the lean working season of about three months. Having rested well, the people await the next festival heralding the work season of the next year.

Sacrifices:

In essence, sacrifices have twofold purposes viz: (i) Propitiation or supplication to God and (ii) getting social recognition. However, the essence of Mao belief is God's supremacy over the human being and that man should be good and honourable to please God. There are mainly four types of sacrifices, which the Mao as a village community or as individuals perform:

(I) Oromanie:

This is a community sacrifice, which is observed by the whole village community on the third day of every month. It is a Sena, day, meaning, it is prohibited for anyone to engage in physical labour. An egg is offered to God near the village gate. Each clan may perform the sacrifice separately on the same day. This sacrifice has two meanings (i) to acknowledge God and praise Him for his Omnipotence, (ii) to keep God pleased and good-humoured so that he will favour the people with a conducive climate and plentiful crops and livestock as well as a good social order.

Early in the morning, the appointed priests go to the village gate with the eggs. He girds himself with a knife, some indigo plants, and a piece of cloth. People who see him go may also throw ashes behind him to indicate that all evil should stay outside the village gate. The egg is placed on the piece of cloth in an upright position together with the branches of the shrub. The movement of people in the village has to be contained before the priest comes back to his house. God invariably accepts an egg, which is the most unblemished white cock and goes to the village gate and lets it go. It is not to be killed. With prayers for the end of the calamity, the chief lets off the cock. The cock, if found in the jungle afterwards can be killed as a jungle fowl and may be given to elderly people for meat.

Individual families may also undertake this sacrifice and in this case, the white cock is taken to the gate by the head of the family or one of the uncles. The cock is touched by the sick person and also taken around the sick person and away to the gate. Family members may throw ashes behind the sacrosanct as he is leaving the house. The family also makes a symbolic chase of the different corners of the house like under the bed, the empty boxes etc. In the belief that if any evil spirit happens to be in the house, it will leave for the jungles at that time. All the while, when the sacrosanct is away, the family will burn the branches of the indigo plant so that the resulting smell may expel any evil spirit that may be harming the patient. When the master of ceremony returns, he is welcomed at the entrance to the house with live charcoal and smoke of the shrub. The branches of the shrub are also kept under the pillow of the sick person.

If a white cock cannot be found, then the sacrifice may be done with some copper coins, some old clothes of the sick person and branches of the shrub. They are taken to the village gate and placed on a cloth spread on the ground. It is meant to supplicate God to accept the gifts and to cure the sick person on whose behalf the offering is made.

(II) Orakapehfa:

This sacrifice may be done by the village as a whole or by individual families. It means simply to propitiate God in times of sickness. During an epidemic, the village as a whole may undertake to offer a sacrifice, in which the Chief is sacrosanct. He takes an unblemished white cock and

(III) Oroko and Zhoso Mozii:

It is a sacrifice of thanksgiving for any special gain or favour with which a person or family is blessed. It is symbolic of the joy of having received a singular blessing from God, and to show it to people in loud terms. The people of the village are asked by family performing the sacrifice to feast with the family and to observe holiday from work on their behalf. The family will kill many animals for meat and call people for feasting. Towards the end of the day, portions of meat are also distributed to all the families of the village. It consists of a chunk each for all the members of the family to whom a meat portion is given. Such a distribution of meat per individual of the entire village is called ‘chilivi kovii’. This sacrifice is performed following the birth of a child, recovery from sickness, harvesting plentiful crops and livestock etc. This particular sacrifice is sometimes a preliminary to a bigger sacrifice called ‘Zhoso Mozii’. It is undertaken by very rich families, who may have accumulated enormous wealth in the form of harvest of 1,000 baskets of paddy and having acquired scores of livestock like cow and mithune. Every Mao nurtures a great craving for such a prestigious position. The family, which performs the sacrifice successfully, is honoured in society, their words are taken seriously and they claim serious attention of the community and they are treated on
a level higher than the common people. In the olden days, some people used to become paupers following this sacrifice. And yet the attraction to gain higher status was so compelling that all continued to look forward to perform this sacrifice. It is the highest sacrifice, which a Mao can perform in life, and with it the performer achieves the highest status in traditional Mao society.

Mozi, the first part of Zhoso Mozi is done with a declaration in public that one is going to perform the sacrifice. Later, some wine is prepared and elders are called to the house to bless the family so that the course of the sacrifice may flow smoothly, free and without problems till its conclusion. The declaration is required to be made during the Sali festival in the assembly of the village elders.

The sacrificial festival begins with the preparation of wine. Barrels for preparing and storing wine are collected from whoever has them in the village and even from neighbouring villages in case one's village does not have enough. Everyone able-bodied person in the village lends a helping hand. The helpers are fed lavishly and hence right from the day preparation starts; the feast has begun. Two children are appointed mainly to keep a watch so that no domestic animals touch the wine barrels. If an animal touches the barrels, it is treated as a bad omen. On the eighth day after the wine is treated for fermentation, known as 'Zhikhi Chacha' the wine should be ready. From the sixth day of wine fermentation, the animals are killed for meat and the feast begins with blessing the stock of wines by the chief and the elders of the village. Young boys and girls of the village are told to go and fetch salty water from salty springs and the cooking of meat in the salty water begins. After the village chief and elders have inaugurated (blessed) the wine on the morning of the eighth day, any person may start coming to the house to feast. There are permanent helpers appointed from among the youth and they would be serving the people who come to feast. In case the attendance at the feast is considered insufficient, the workers will go out and call the villagers to come and enjoy the feast. Every visitor will eat and drink as much as he can and he is given a chunk of meat at the time of departure. Children of the village are called to eat in groups and they will also be given pieces of meat as they go. Then there will be family wise distribution of meat on the main day. Children are called to a very special game where the Zhoso-Mozi family will throw bits of meat in the air and the children will compete in collecting the meat pieces.

As people stream to the house for food and drink, the celebrant family accepts gifts of coins and rice. The father of the house is expected to keep himself sober and receive the people. He may drink at the end of the day. The celebrations may last a few days, and each day an attempt is made to call as many people as there are in the village. The Zhoso-Mozi family has to maintain the spirit of the feast for one whole year. The meat has to last for the whole year and their wine barrel cannot be empty for even a day during this one year. The family has also to keep praying to God continuously throughout the year.

On an appointed day, the village people are called to help him erect a mound of stones in his own memory. He may also find a big memory stone and erect it at some auspicious place near the village. After completion of the raising of the memory stone and the mound in the village, the family can relax and experience satisfaction of having achieved the highest social status. At the end of the year, the man wears a special commemorative shawl of social recognition to which he becomes entitled. He can now wear that shawl in public places and meetings. His reputation spreads far and wide, his children will be sought after in marriage. He will be heard when he speaks. People will regard him as one near to God and acknowledge him as the favourite of God.

Village Purification Ceremony:
The Maos follow a practice of purifying the village symbolically once a year. On an appointed day, the chief will declare a genna and call for the purification ritual. An appointed person prepares a human figure with straw and old clothes outside the village. An announcement is made that families examine themselves and find out all people, spirits that caused them harm during the year. Each family prepares a list of theft committed against them, evil spirits that caused them sickness etc. and prepares one lance (made of stick) for each of the culprits. On the appointed day, one person from the family goes near the scarecrow, hurling the lance at it and cursing the spirits of all those who caused harm to the family. From the number of participants and the number of sticks thrown, the people will judge whether their village is progressing, disciplined and living in harmony. Accordingly, the chief will promulgate laws to live better lives, work hard, fear God, promote harmony amongst people etc. Prayers are offered that God may forgive the wrongs of the inmate of the village and urges Him to improve the fortunes of the villagers. Among the Maos, the village chief is most faithful to the code of conduct and laws, as the village believes that God punishes people by creating calamities like famine and pestilence if the chief is found in the wrong.

(Mr. Paul Lokho is the Regional Manager of the Indo-German Social Service Society)