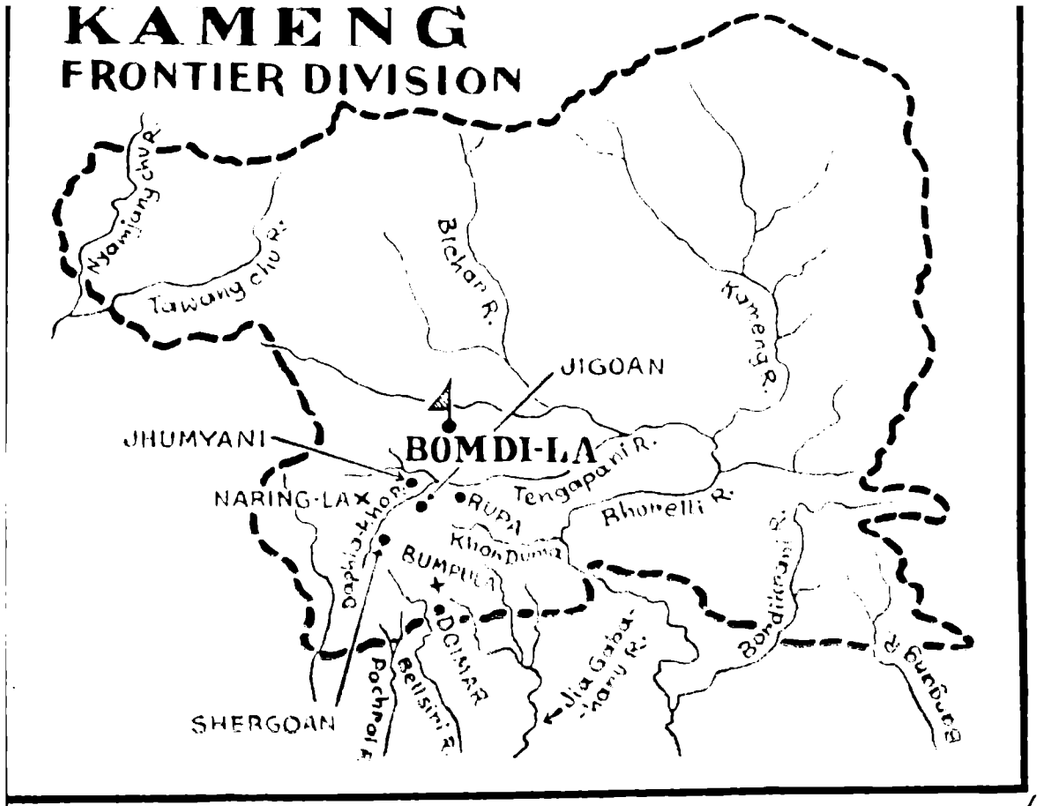
Th AKAS

RAGHUVIR SINHA



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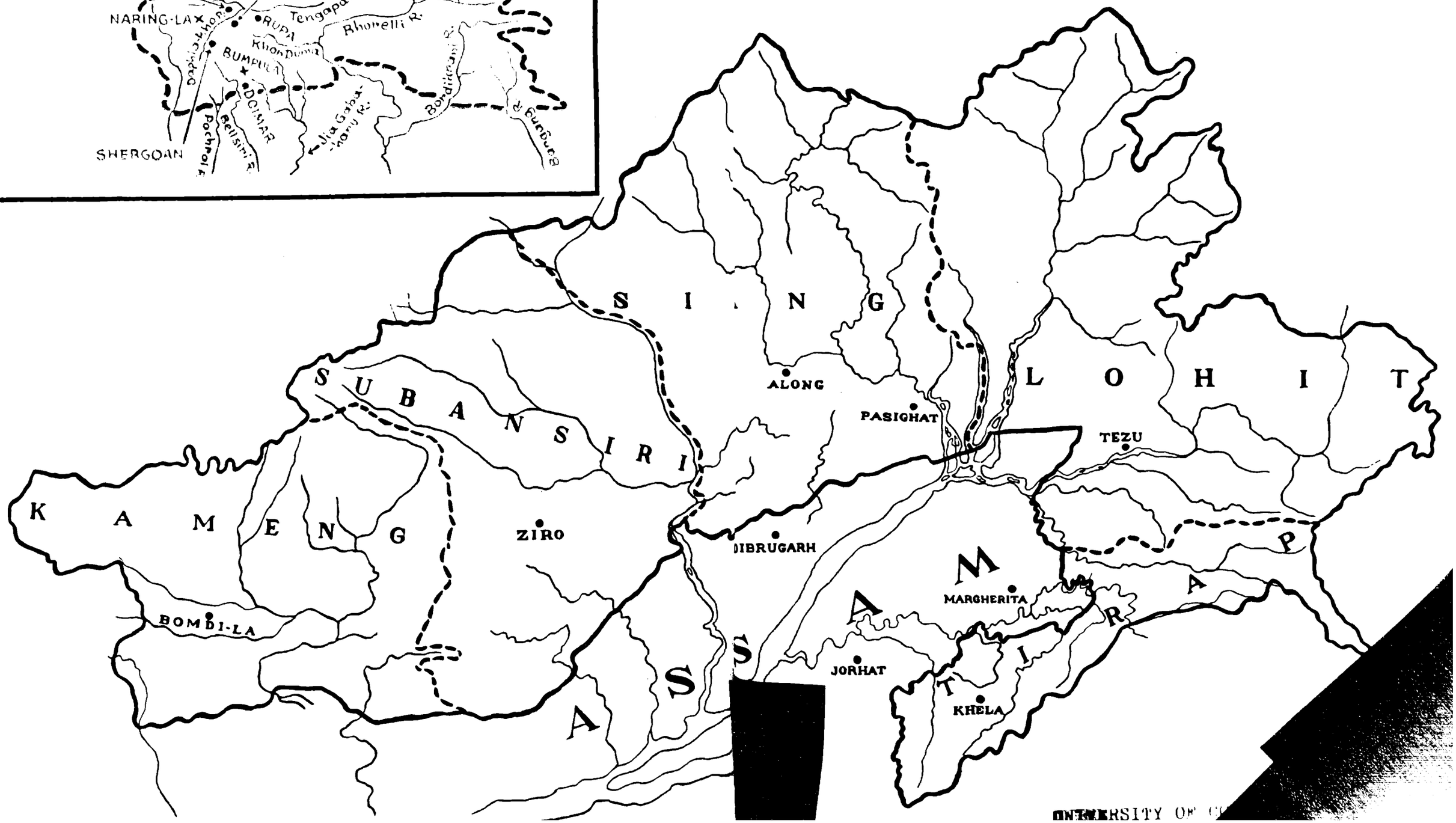

THE PEOPLE OF NEFA

THE AKAS

RAGHUVIR SINHA

Divisional Research Officer, Kameng Frontier Division

North-East Frontier Agency

RESEARCH DEPARTMENT, ADVISER'S SECRETARIAT

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The North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) is a wild and mountainous tract of about 30,000 sq. miles in the Assam Himalayas bounded by Bhutan, Tibet, Burma and the Valley of the Brahmaputra. It is divided for administrative purposes into five Frontier Divisions — Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap—with their headquarters at Bomdi La, Ziro, Along, Tezu and Khonsa respectively. It is inhabited by a large number of Indo-Mongoloid tribes, speaking some fifty different dialects. This book describes the Akas, a small but important tribe living in the Kameng Division.

PREFACE

About two years ago, Dr Verrier Elwin asked me to write a small book on the Akas, a small tribe living in the Kameng Frontier Division of NEFA, which might be useful to our team of workers in these frontier areas. This knowledge of the life and culture of the people has been considered necessary by the Administration in order to promote the tribal interest, which is its primary aim, as well as to develop among the government servants a sympathy and respect for the people.

I have since then concentrated on the study of this tribe and have set out my findings in this monograph. In doing so, I have tried to give an overall picture of the culture of the Akas. Each part of a culture is related to the other and has a bearing on the total culture; the culture of a people has a meaning in the system of inter-relations of these different parts in the context of the culture as a whole.

I have, of course, approached the subject from an anthropologist's point of view, but in doing so I have tried to put forth the findings in as simple and clear terms as possible, in order to make the work readable even to the layman. In my expression I have tried to be direct and brief. I have abstained from giving any anthropological or sociological interpretations, except at a few places where they seemed necessary. The main problem before me in writing this book has been to find a via media between the anthropologist's quest for scientific

knowledge and the popular demand. How far I have been successful in this is for the readers to judge.

I have to express here my gratitude to Shri K. L. Mehta and Shri N. K. Rustomji, the former and the present Adviser to the Governor of Assam, for giving me the opportunity to carry on my research. My gratitude to Dr Verrier Elwin, Adviser for Tribal Affairs, is beyond all measure ; his scholarship and his dedication to the cause of tribal welfare have been a constant source of inspiration to me. I am also grateful to our Political Officer, Shri Har Mander Singh, who has read through the typescript of the book and has made valuable comments. Besides, I owe a debt of gratitude to many other friends who have helped me in preparing the manuscript for the press.

I hope that besides serving the purpose of the NEFA staff, the book will also help in introducing these wonderful hill people to the rest of the country.

Bomdi La : R. SINHA
1959

Approaching the Aka area. A little further from the river lies the first Aka village

Two little friends

THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

Aka is the name given to a small tribal group inhabiting the sub-Himalayan regions of India towards the southern area of the Kameng Frontier Division of the North-East Frontier Agency. They live in an area of about a hundred and twenty square miles and number about two thousand.

I. THE COUNTRY

The Aka area is bounded on the north by the Miji territory, on the south by the Darrang district of Assam, on the west by the land where the Sherdukpens live and on the east by the Bangni territory. The Mijis are very closely related to the Akas, have many similar beliefs and customs and also intermarry with them. The Bangnis are also in contact with the Akas but they have only trade relations with them.

The country of the Akas is covered with forests and mountainous tracts with a number of streams and rivers. The main rivers of the region are the Bichom (*Humschu*), the Tenga-pani (*Hudju*) and the Kheyang (*Khuwa*).[1] They are fordable for the greater part of the year. The people make cane suspension-bridges for the rains. Besides these there are also some big streams. Bamboo jungles are in abundance.

[1] The names given are the common names of the rivers ; the italicized names in brackets are the names of the rivers in the Aka language.

Wild plantain trees grow almost throughout the area ; broad-leafed forests are also common.

The most common animals are the barking-deer, the porcupine, the monkey, the bear and the panther.

The climate of the region is mildly cold. Rainfall is not very heavy and ranges between 40 to 50 inches in most places.

The Aka villages are situated on the hill-tops as well as in the valleys. The altitude of these villages varies from about 3000 to 6000 feet. They are always sited with an eye on the water-source. The settlements are usually made in the places where people can find enough land for Jhum cultivation. Field-huts are built near the Jhum lands and these small habitations become known as *pam*[2] which gradually grow into independent villages.

There are twenty-one recognized Aka villages.[3] These are Jamiri, Hushigaon, Buragaon, Dijungania, Karangania, Ramdgania, Sakrin, Pusing, Gijiria, Yayong, Tulu, Tania, Palathari, Samigaon, Raghugaon, Rukhugaon, Morrukha, Kararamu and Pichang, Chisong and Kichang.[4] Dijungania is the largest Aka village ; Jamiri and Buragaon are two other important villages.

Most villages do not have more than a score of houses. The population in Aka villages ranges from

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[2] *Pam* is an Assamese for temporary huts in fields. It is in popular usage among the Akas as well as other tribes of the division.

[3] For statistical figures on population, houses etc., I have relied on the data available with the Statistical Department.

[4] These include the big *pam* settlements which have grown into villages. The last three are Miri-Aka villages.

about fifty to sixty people, except in case of Dijungania which has 40 houses and a population of about 304 people. Unlike other Aka settlements, which are homogeneous, Dijungania has a mixed population of Akas, Mijis and Daflas, though the last two constitute only a small minority, the distribution of houses being 31, 7 and 2 respectively. The Akas have close connections and common interests with Mijis[5] who have more or less assimilated themselves with Aka society in this village, whereas the Daflas[6] have a distinct existence without any social communion with either of them.

As to when the Daflas and the Mijis settled in Dijungania and what brought about their migration to the village, it is difficult to say in the absence of any historical records or other authentic data. However, on the basis of verbal accounts available with the people of the village, the Mijis seem to have migrated to this place about 40 to 50 years ago while a period dating back to about 60 to 80 years seems probable for the migration of the Daflas. No disturbance arose in Aka society on the advent of the newcomers and the intruders were allowed to purchase land and settle peacefully in the villages. There has been no trouble about them ever since.

II. THE PEOPLE

The Akas call themselves Hrusso. Aka is, in fact, the name given to them by the plains people.

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[5] The Mijis call themselves Dhammai.

[6] Dafla is the name given to the Bangnis by the plains people.

The word 'Aka' denotes 'painted' and it may have been used for them by the people of Assam largely because of their 'custom of painting their faces profusely' which might have served as a distinctive mark.

The Akas have fair complexions. They have a well-built body, usually a flat nose, conspicuous cheek-bones with black hair and usually brownish to pale blue eyes. Men grow scanty hair on the face as well as over the body. Their stature varies from medium to tall, men being usually taller than women.

The name of the Akas constantly figures in the earlier accounts of the British period. The records of the nineteenth century mention Akas as a tribe sub-divided into two clans : the Hazarikhowas, or 'eaters at a thousand hearths' and Kapaschors, or 'thieves who lurk amid the cotton plants'.[7] The two terms, which have been used for the Kutsun and Kovatsun sections of the Akas, have been interpreted differently by the various writers. Hesselmeyer mentions that 'this handful of hill people live in two detached villages. The greater one is inhabited by Akas who have earned for themselves the sobriquet of cotton-thieves, or Kapaschor. The smaller is peopled by a less offensive clan called the Hazarikhowa, or breakfast-eaters'.[8] Another writer, Macgregor, also interprets the two words, Hazarikhowas and Kapas-

[7] A. Mackenzie, *History* (1884), p.21, quoted by Verrier Elwin, *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (Bombay, 1959), p. 429.

C. H. Hesselmeyer, 'The Hill-Tribes of the Northern Frontier of Assam' *J. A. S. B.*, 1868, Vol. XXXVII. pp. 192 ff., quoted by Verrier Elwin, ibid., P. 439.

chors, as meaning 'eaters of a thousand hearths' and 'thieves of cotton' respectively.[9]

It has been suggested that 'Hazarikhowa' may be better translated as 'devourer of a thousand hearths.'[10]

The Akas were thus divided, according to the earlier records, into two main clans, the Hazarikhowa or Kutsun and Kapaschor or Kovatsun, each organized under a Raja or chief. The Hazarikhowas had a right to *posa*,[11] conceded by the Assamese, while the Kapaschors enjoyed no such privilege but managed somehow to extort the contributions from the cultivators. It was to the Hazarikhowas that the Assam Government (the British Administration at the time of the annexation of Assam) granted the right of *posa*. From the records of 1825, it appears that the Hazarikhowas were entitled to receive from each house of their allotted *khels* 'one portion of a female dress, one bundle of cotton thread, and one cotton handkerchief'.

The *posa* may be explained better as a tribute-money paid to the hill-tribes of the frontiers for peace. At this time, probably the Kapaschors were not considered a separate clan, for it had been learnt

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[9] C. R. Macgregor, 'Notes on the Akas and the Akaland' *Proc, A.S.B.*, 1884, quoted by Verrier Elwin, ibid., p. 447.

[10] ibid., p. 439 fn.

[11] According to Mackenzie, the *posa* was a 'well-ascertained revenue payment, on account of which a corresponding remission was made in the State demand upon the *ryot* satisfying it'. It may have had its origin in encroachment, or it may have been based upon customary and primeval rights asserted by hillmen, he further adds, but it was 'a distinct feature in the revenue system of the country when the British annexed Assam'. A. Mackenzie, *History* (1884), p. 21.

(probably from the earlier records), observes Mackenzie, that the Hazarikhowas were expected to give a part of their collections to the Kapaschors.

The importance attached to the Akas, Hesselmeyer noted, was due to the bad name which they bore among the people of the valley, inhabiting the part of the country touching the Aka hills.[12] It is also said that their importance was due to their situation between the people of the valley of Assam and the powerful and very numerous clans of the Miji tribe, who, unlike the former, are reported as not being in the habit of visiting Assam, but who purchased silk from the Akas against exorbitant prices.[13]

Accounting for a third cause of the importance of the Akas, Hesselmeyer remarks : 'although powerless themselves, they know how to make themselves formidable through the influence they manage to exercise over the Mijis, whose countless hosts they would be able without much difficulty to lead any day against any foe.'[14]

We meet with references to these sections of the tribe in the accounts by Aitchison, who has called them Kutsun and Kovatsun, and who also mentions that they were formerly called Hazarikhowa and Kapaschor by the Assamese. The same accounts tell us that the former received a *posa* from the Rajas of Assam and that the latter levied contributions

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[12] C. H. Hesselmeyer, 'The Hill-Tribes of the Northern Frontier of Assam', *J.A.S.B.*, 1868, Vol. XXXVII, quoted by Verrier Elwin, ibid., p. 439.

[13] ibid., p. 439.

[14] ibid., p. 439.

without any such title. He further says : 'Both tribes are small but on account of their superior civilization they are much respected and even feared by the surrounding tribes'.[15]

Sir Robert Reid mentions that 'the Akas are divided into two tribes, the Kavatsun and the Kutsun ; each of these is under its chief or Raja, who is the nominal head ; it greatly depends on the personality of the Raja as to the amount of power he enjoys. The post is an elected one and not hereditary.'[16]

Apart from the above two main clans of the Akas, the Kutsun and the Kovatsun, there is another sub-division of the tribe commonly known by the name of Miri-Akas, who live on the other side of the Kaya river and nearer to the Bangnis. The Miri-Akas, who are known as Khrome, share the common customs, beliefs and practices with the Akas or Hrussos, profess the same religion, and in physical features too, they are much alike. The difference, if any, lies in their language. The Hrussos speak their own dialect whereas the Miri-Akas speak a dialect known as 'Miri'. They seem to have remained rather unapproached by the early expeditions.

Only casual references occur about the Miri-Akas who have been also mentioned as Angka-Miris in the earlier accounts. Hesselmeyer speaks of a third class of Angkas 'spoken of by the people of the plains who go by the name of Angka-Miris', and says that they

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[15] C. U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads.*

[16] Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam* (Shillong, 1942), p. 295.

were located in the old maps 'beyond the snowy range'.[17] He adds that the Angka-Miris are reported by all accounts to be living to the east of the Kapaschor Angkas.

The probability for this sub-tribe of the Akas with the adjunct of 'Miri' of having any connection with the Miris of the plains seems to be almost ruled out by the above writer since he says that the plains Miris have denied having 'ever heard of Angka-Miris'.[18]

III. LATER HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE

The Akas can claim to have played an important role in the history of the North-Eastern Frontier of India. There have been many historical episodes related to the Akas during the last few centuries. It is not possible to account them all in detail here. Only a few of the instances, which occurred during the late last century, may be cited.

The Akas, like other hillmen who had a privilege to *posa* since the times of Ahom rulers, used to come down every year to collect their petty dues from each house. This often led to some sort of trouble for both the people in the plains as well as the authorities. The Government tried to replace this inconvenient practice of individual collection by a more convenient system of an annual lump payment. The intentions of the proposal were in some cases suspected by the Hrussos. The claims under the new

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[17] C. H. Hesselmeyer, quoted by Verrier Elwin, *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 439.

[18] ibid., p. 439.

arrangement were fixed at Rs. 175/- annually for the Hazarikhowas. The *posa* was, however, withheld for a number of years when the Kapaschors gave rise to some trouble in 1835, and with which the Hazarikhowas were also alleged to have been associated. Mackenzie says that, though the Kapaschors numbered only about eighty families, they were able to defy the authorities of both the Ahom rulers, and later the British Government for many years, because of the nature of the country and their local knowledge of it.[19]

The Kapaschor Akas arranged a raid under the leadership of their chief, Tagi Raja, and wiped out a British outpost at Balipara in 1835. Mackenzie observes: 'the energy and daring of Tagi Raja had made him this time the virtual chief of both clans of Akas', and also given him influence over the neighbouring Daflas. As a result of this trouble, the *posa* payment to the Hazarikhowas was withheld by the Government. Occasional raids of the Akas continued to be made for a few more years. Peace was, however, ensured after a treaty with them in 1844. The Kapaschors were also made entitled to an annual *posa* of Rs. 520/- in 1848.[20]

The boundary-line of the Akas was demarcated with their neighbouring people in the west in 1872-3 by the Government. The Hazarikhowas did not object to this arrangement; the grant of some acres

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[19] A. Mackenzie, *History* (1884), p. 22.

[20] Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam* (Shillong, 1942), p. 270.

of land in the plains in 1873 further gratified them. The Kapaschors did not, however, agree to the boundary-line arrangement between the Bhoreli and Khai Dikrai rivers ; they instead pressed their 'extravagant claims'. However, after some time, they gave in and the line was demarcated in 1874-75.

Some trouble arose again in 1883 with the depredations by the Akas in the plains. The root cause for this has been attributed to a curious incident. As the records tell, an official was deputed to collect some specimens of agricultural and other implements from the Hrussos for the Calcutta Exhibition and to persuade some people to come down to be modelled. The official seems to have given the people an idea that he had been sent to take down to Calcutta 'a Raja and a Rani with all their ornaments.' The Akas were naturally furious over this ; they captured the official and kept him and his party under detention. They sent a party to Balipara for a planned silent raid. They also put up extravagant claims in a threatening tone. A punitive force was rushed to the Aka hills to bring the situation under control. The Akas gave in before the armed force and the trouble gradually subsided. They entered into a peace settlement in 1888 with the Government.

During the earlier twentieth century, a big expedition, commonly known as the 'Aka Promenade', was arranged under Captain Nevill. The party visited the Aka country in 1914, and was able to establish friendly relations with the people. Captain Neufville wrote of them in 1825 : 'These Akas are an excellent and most interesting people,

they are much more civilized than the Daflas and they are capable of great improvement.' Kennedy, who visited them with the 'Aka Promenade', also observes: 'the Akas are a much more enlightened and civilized people than the other hill-tribes further east'.[21] Dr Elwin remarks: 'the Akas in later years continued to win the respect of those who visited them'.[22]

It is thus apparent that, till the end of the last century, the Akas were a warlike people. It may be largely, because of such activities that theyg ained supremacy among the neighbouring tribes. The Sherdukpens and the Khowas used to pay taxes to them in recognition of their supremacy. The earlier accounts mention that the Bhutias[23] lived under a constant terror of the Akas. There is ample evidence in the legends of the Sherdukpens and the Khowas to corroborate this.[24]

Three written engagements had to be made with them by the British Government—two Agreements (Nos. XXXII and XXXIII in 1844 and the Terms of Peace (No. XLIV) signed in 1888. They were allotted some small areas of land in the plains for

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[21] Kennedy, quoted by Verrier Elwin in *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (Bombay, 1959).

[22] Verrier Elwin, ibid., p. 454.

[23] The term '*Bhutia*' has been often wrongly used as a collective name for a number of tribes having some belief in Buddhism or more often to signify 'People of Bhutan.' The correct rendering is "People of Tibetan stock." The Mompas and the Sherdukpens are thus sometimes called or referred to as Bhutia.

[24] See Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* (Shillong, 1959), pp. 120 ff.

cultivation. After the last peace-settlement, the Akas have given no further trouble. They have now become a peace-loving people, having given up their warlike traits of tribal feuds and internecine wars which once characterised them. With the advent of the present Administration, they have further learnt the ways and privileges of peaceful living. The Akas have now become good agriculturists, keen traders and an industrious people. They also sometimes act as middlemen to Dhammais, or Mijis, and to other neighbouring people. They purchase many articles from the plains of Assam. The Akas are also said to have come under certain amount of Hindu and Buddhist influence, though it has not been very remarkable.[25]

IV. MIGRATION OF THE PEOPLE

No definite statement can be made, at this stage, about the original home of the Akas, as this part of their history is still unknown. The earlier writers have given some probable views about the place from where the Akas might have migrated to their present homeland. Hesselmeyer remarks that the Hrussos 'do not pretend to be the native inhabitants of the country which they now occupy', and have been unable 'to account for their real home'. According to Hesselmeyer, the Hrussos believe themselves to be inhabitants of the plains, and that their 'ancestors

[25] Kennedy has noted an element of Buddhism in the Aka religion. R. S. Kennedy, *Ethnological Report on the Akas, Khowas and Mijis and the Mombas of Tawang* (Shillong, 1914). Also referred by Verrier Elwin in his *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 442.

were driven out from Partabgor on the banks of the Giladhari river, north of Bishnath, by Krishna and Boloram.[26] Kennedy, however, gives another version, quoting from a legend among the people, according to which they believe themselves to have 'descended to the earth by golden and silver ladders'.[27]

V. LANGUAGE

It is not possible at present to make any definite or detailed statements about the Aka language. The language of the Akas is quite different from their neighbouring tribes, the Daflas, the Mijis, the Mompas and the Sherdukpens. The dialect of the Hrussos even differs basically from the dialect of the Miri-Akas. Philological records at our disposal are so far too scanty to establish any facts. The earlier writers have, of course, made some probable suggestions about the language of the Akas. But they cannot be taken to be scientific unless further philological evidence corroborates them. Hesselmeyer, who believed that 'the language of the Akas tells a tale', suggested that it contains more words which could be 'traced to the valleys south of the Patkoi, joining the Shan and Manipuri countries than words indicating a closer affinity with the Dafla and Abor tribes.'[28]

Some details about the Aka philology are, however, available in the *Linguistic Survey of India*

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[26] C. H. Hesselmeyer, quoted by Verrier Elwin, *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (Bombay, 1959), p. 438.

[27] R. S. Kennedy, quoted by Verrier Elwin, ibid., p. 538.

[28] C. H. Hesselmeyer, quoted by Verrier Elwin, ibid., p. 438.

Report.[29] According to this survey, the Aka language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. It holds that 'the difference between Aka and the other dialects of the group'—which it calls the North-Assam Group and puts under it, the Aka, the Dafla, the Abor-Miri and the Mishmi dialects—'is still greater'. It is remarked that 'under the influence of strange and radical phonetical laws Aka has assumed a peculiar appearance and it is often difficult to compare its vocabulary with that of other Tibeto-Burman forms of speech.'[30] According to the view put forth in the report, the Aka language also 'differs from the other dialects of the group in many details of grammar'. It is also suggested that on the whole the North-Assam Group is 'not merely philological but also rather a geographical group.[31]

These, however, remain only the probable philological views about Aka language. It may only be said at this stage, that both the dialects of the Akas, the Hrusso dialect and the Miri-Aka dialect, though they differ mostly among themselves, probably belong to the same common stock of languages—the Tibeto-Burman Group.

The dialect of the Miri-Akas, which differs from the dialect of the Hrussos, forming the basic point of difference between the two sections of the Aka

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[29] Compiled by G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India Report*, Vol. III, Part I (Calcutta, 1909).

[30] It may be noted here that the above accounts give the term 'Tanae' as the name of the Aka tribe, a word which we do not find either mentioned or referred in any other records. Compare, however, *tani* = man in Adi.

[31] ibid.

tribe, is not the same as the commonly known dialect of the Hill-Miris, nor does it show any close affinity with the Bangni dialect spoken in the neighbouring areas of the Miri-Akas. As to when this difference in the dialects of the Akas and the Miri-Akas arose, it is not possible to account for, unless adequate philological research brings some more facts to light. At the present stage, it only seems probable that a section of the Akas, having occupied this part of the country, might have been geographically isolated from their community-brethren on the other side of the river, and thus might have evolved, in course of time, a distinct dialect of their own which they speak to this day.

DOMESTIC LIFE

The social and economic life of the Akas is largely determined by the conditions of their habitat. The hilly tracts do not leave any other alternative to Jhumming. The abundance of jungle further provides ample resource to practise the indigenous system. The overall result is that the Akas are still one of the main Jhum cultivators among the tribes of India.

The abundance of bamboo-groves plays a great role in as much as it provides to them the material for house-building. As a result, we find the same type of bamboo houses all over the Aka country. A number of vessels and pots of their daily use are carved from bamboo. Similarly, cane, which is also quite common in the forests, furnishes a material of great utility for making various articles of domestic use.

Life amidst the forest habitat has rendered them the possibility of supplementing their food by a number of edible forest produce. It is again the thick forests around them into which they have to move constantly, and the urge for defence against the wild life that have made the Akas good archers. And lastly, it is the hard and arduous life in these hills and the struggle, which they have to make against the inhospitable forces of nature, that have cast

a deep imprint on the life and thought of the people, and have made them believers in the scheme of malevolent and benevolent gods.

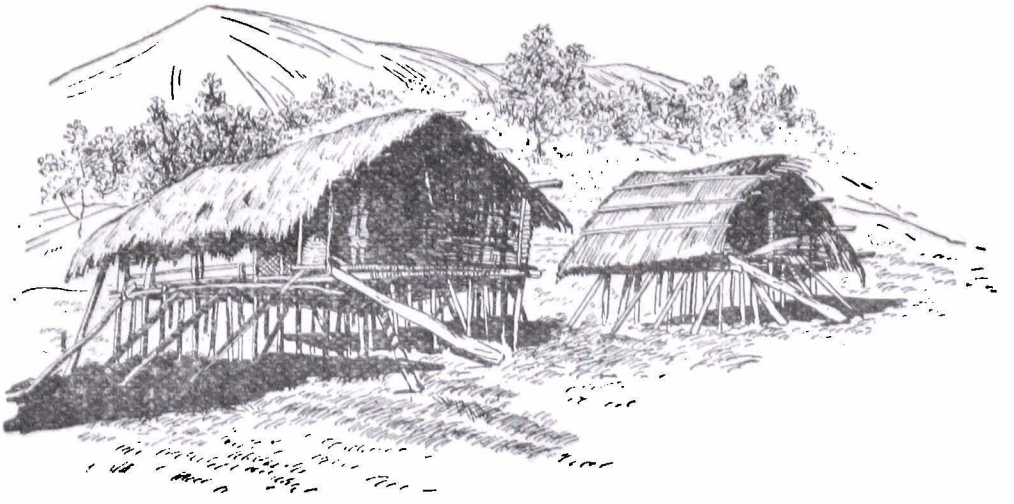
The isolation of these people from their neighbours has helped them to evolve an independent culture which we will discuss in the following chapters.

At cane work

The domestic life of the Akas starts from the individual household and extends to the community as a whole. Most of the things of the community warrant the assistance of the people from the individual houses. Similarly, the people of the village have to look forward for the mutual co-operation of the community in some of the important tasks like house-building.

I. THE HOUSE

The Aka house is a long structure raised on a platform, about six feet above the ground, and divided into two compartments by a partition wall. The space between the platform and the ground serves as a shed for pigs and goats of the household. The house is a work of bamboo and wood, bamboo sheets forming the floor, the wall and the roof, and wooden logs serving as the main pillars over which the structure of the house is raised. The roof is usually thatched, and often supported by bamboo sheets. The four walls of the house are usually high.



A typical Aka house and granary

The main entrance to the house is from the front though there are inlets both in the front and at the rear of the house. Just behind the front door, there is the first and the small compartment called *thumona* and built specially for guests. As a part of the social tradition, guests from even distant villages visit their friends and relatives from time to time; hence the special provision for their lodging in every

Aka house, with a view to ensure every possible comfort to them.[32] Even when there is no guest staying, the *thumona* is left unoccupied.

Next to this compartment for the guests, is a small enclosure, called *nemkhowri,* which serves as the main entrance to the inner big hall. Such a *nemkhowri* is usually made also at the rear of the house. The main hall, known as *uluri,* is a big compartment, standing behind the above enclosure. It is the main and the only hall, practically for all purposes, for the occupants of the house. Where the families of two brothers have to live together (which in fact is not common as the people do not favour joint-family system), they may occupy two different sides of the same main hall, there being no provision for a partition wall inside the *uluri.* In such a case, what may be required is not a separate room but only a separate hearth for each of the families. Almost every compartment in the house has at least one hearth with an iron-stand known as *aescheperi.* To keep the house warm, fire is kept burning in the hearths. The iron hearth-stands are made from both pig iron and cast iron, which may be procured from the plains, and are considered a valuable part of the household property.

On one side of the house, there is built a small cell to serve the purpose of store-room where the articles of the household or any other belongings of

[32] The institution of *thumona* (exchange of mutual visits of guests) has been described separately under the chapter on the Social Institutions and Usages.

the owner may be kept. This is known as *rin*. On the other side of the hall also, a small enclosure is built into the wall to keep firewood, and is known as *sejourin*. All these compartments in the house, including the main hall, are kept completely shut off from light to keep away the *dim-dam* flies which are a constant nuisance in these areas.

A small granary is built usually near the house and food supplies for the year are kept here. This is called *nechi*. Like most of the tribes of the plains, who have no common granary for the whole village community, the Akas have a separate granary for each house. Commonly, a small kitchen-garden is attached to the house to grow vegetables. Where enough land is available near the house, the people may convert it into a small field to grow crops like maize on a small scale. The garden is enclosed either by bamboo or wooden fencing to protect the growth against wild animals as well as against their own semi-domestic animals like mithun.

The houses in Aka villages are not compact; they are generally scattered throughout the village. Only in Dijungania, the houses are situated close to each other.

The house is built with the joint labour of the members of the village who help one another in building a house for every household of the community. No remuneration in cash or kind is required to be paid for the labour. Only a big feast is given to those who participate in the construction of the house, by the owner at the end of their toil.

Carrying thatching material

II. THE ARTICLES OF HOUSEHOLD USE

(i) *Utensils*

The utensils of the Akas, which form an essential part of the articles or contents of the household, except a few bamboo jars and vessels are not indigenous. Most utensils of daily use have to be procured, like the cloth, from the plains of Assam. The people do not practise pottery. They are able to carve only a few jars out of bamboo for their daily

use. These bamboo jars are of various shapes and sizes. One of the common types is known as *kichhu* which is used extensively for storing *lao-pani* (the local drink) and other drinks. Another type of vessel largely used for bringing water from streams is known as *schhou*. Another vessel, serving the same purpose but bigger in size, is known as *mon*. A type of bamboo flask, largely in use for drinking *lao-pani* and the two other drinks, *aarah* and *mingri*, is known as *schaspoo*. The making of these bamboo pots for their domestic use is almost a part of their traditional set-up and, as it does not require any ingenuity, almost every family is able to make such vessels for its requirements.

Besides these, a number of metal utensils for cooking and other purposes are procured from the plains. These are of various types and each has been given a local name. *Soukhou* is the frying pot; *bela* is a bigger pot used for storing as well as serving food. The Akas also purchase some earthern utensils from some of the neighbouring people. The transaction of goods is done through the indigenous barter system in which they give salt and cloth in exchange for the earthen pots.

(ii) *Weapons of War and Chase*

A number of weapons are possessed by the Akas which are of practical use to them in war and chase as well as in their day-to-day tasks. All such weapons, which they need, are locally made. These weapons of the Akas can be broadly classified into two main categories on the basis of their practical use: the

weapons of war and the weapons of the chase. The latter also serve the purpose as weapons of defence.

With the cessation of the warlike activities, which characterised them till late, the weapons of war, instead of falling into total disuse, now serve their purpose as defensive weapons. They are yet of immense importance to them since it is with these weapons that the people protect themselves against wild animals, and also practise hunting. The most important weapon of this kind is the bow and the arrow, known by the names of *tkeri* and *moo* respectively, and used extensively in the chase. These are made in small and large sizes by the people themselves for their requirements. The former are usually handled by boys for shooting birds, while the latter are useful in big hunts. The bow and the arrow are both made from bamboo. Like bows, arrows can also be divided into two types —those which are used for shooting birds, and those which are used during big game hunting. The latter are fitted with tips of iron and smeared with aconite poison. The bows are usually hung over the shoulders while the arrows are carried in a case of bamboo, called *thouvou*. The boys get training in archery from their early age so that, by the time they attain manhood, they become good archers.

Another weapon, originally of war but now of defence, is a kind of crude harpoon, one end of which is barbed with sharp iron nails. It is used by hurling at the target from a distance. It seems to have been quite a popular weapon in the days of internecine tribal feuds.

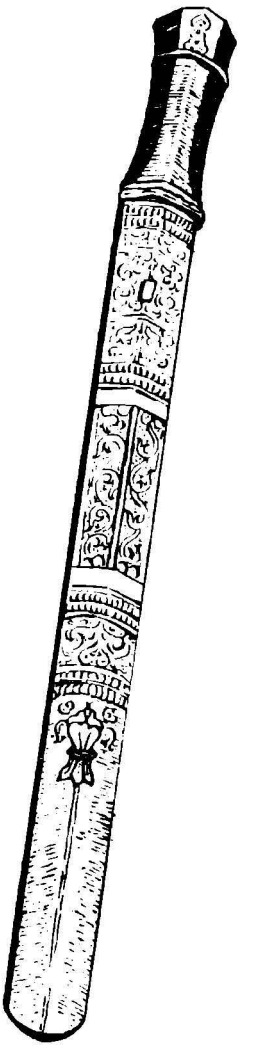
The most common weapon, both of daily practi-

cal use and for defence or offence, is the dao. It is of extensive use to the people in their day-to-day tasks, such as cutting wood and bamboo pieces, clearing shrubs and other growth in the forest, in making different baskets as well as killing mithun and pigs

An Aka in the act of shooting

for sacrifice or feast. It is made from steel, and is usually covered with a bamboo-sheath when not in use. Some of the richer people keep their dao enclosed in sheaths which may be of silver or silver-plated. Dao, for which the local term is *wetz*, are, like the bow and the arrow, of various sizes. The biggest type

of *wetz* (dao) is known as *wetzpa*, the medium size by the name of *wetfa* and the smallest size as *wetza*; the classificatory term for all of them, however, remains *wetz*. It is largely because of its wide practical use and because it may be needed at any moment for one task or the other, that an Aka always hangs a dâo across his waist.



Aka sword in silver sheath

III. THE COTTAGE INDUSTRIES

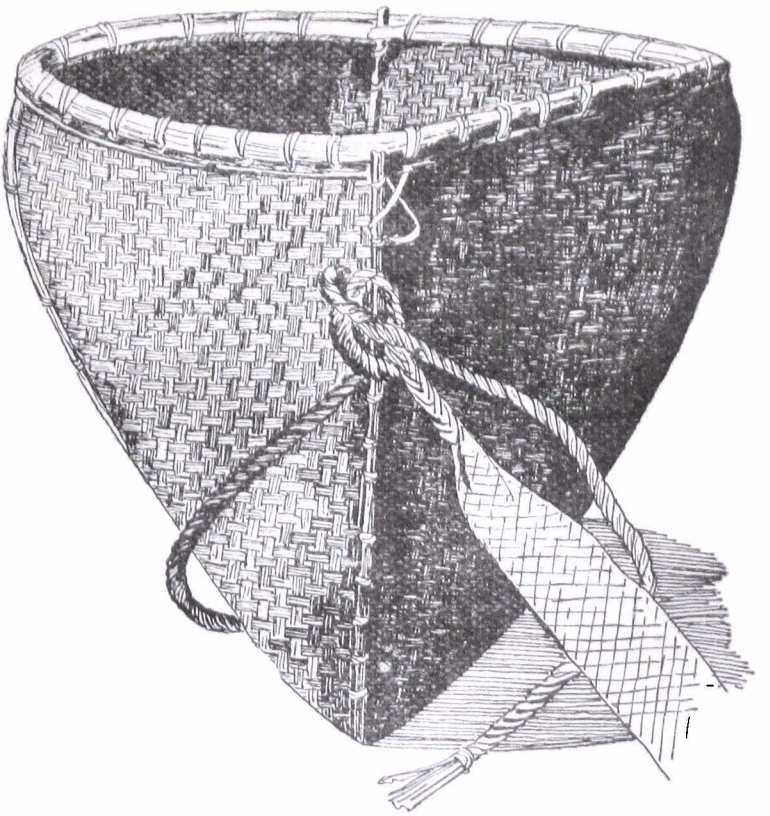
The Akas utilise their leisure by engaging themselves in various small cottage industries. Basket making is a popular industry with the people.

(i) *Basketry*

Baskets of different shapes and sizes are made by menfolk. Those, who have acquired some skill in the craft, usually take the lead while other members of the community too can make baskets to meet their own needs. The practice of basket-making has, however, not given rise to any kind of special class within the tribal group, exclusively professing the trade.

Bamboo is obtained from the groves which are quite abundant in these parts. After being cut into thin pieces, they are woven in different ways to give shape to various types of baskets. A common type is the *mou* basket. Another variety is the *biu* basket,

used by women for storing corn or seed when they go for sowing. A third type of basket, useful for keeping the fish-catch, is known as *gizu*. Besides these, the people make bamboo jars and pots for their domestic use.



A conical Aka basket

Baskets of cane are also made, the most common being the *schri* basket used for carrying food while on the move from one place to another.

(ii) *Weaving*

Weaving is not in practice on a large scale. It is known only to the extent of making colourful bags by the Aka women. Again, the handiwork is limited to the villages of Jamiri and Hushigaon.

IV. DRESS

The dress of the Akas, both men and women, is simple. Since they do not weave themselves so as to be able to produce cloth for their requirements, they have to depend upon the plains for their wearing apparel. This dependence on the plains for their clothing is not a thing of the recent past. They have been going down to the plains for purchasing cloth and other commodities like salt and utensils for a pretty long time. Men invariably wear a small garment, hanging below the shoulders and covering the upper half of the body. It is made to fit the body and is known as *shoshiu-ge*. Men also wear a kind of long coat which hangs from shoulders to knees. This is made usually from rough cotton cloth (markin) and is known as *pol*.

Women wear a long garment over the body which hangs from the shoulders upto the ankles. It is longer than the men's garment, and is usually coloured dark red. This upper garment of women is also known as *pol*. Both men and women cover the legs, with a piece of cloth called *gudu*, sewn into cylindrical shape which leaves only the feet uncovered. These are worn as a protection against the *dimdam* flies.

Men usually do not wear any head-dress ; only on some occasions they may put a kind of ring-cap of bamboo, called *musarga*, over the head. Men wear a dao, sometimes with a silver case, across the waist, particularly when going out

There is no particular ceremonial dress. The same dress may be worn on common as well as

ceremonial occasions. The difference, if any, is that women adorn themselves profusely with ornaments around the neck, and the forehead in the latter case. The appearance of men on ceremonial occasions does not change much. Only on some occasions they may wrap over the shoulders a piece of blanket to distinguish the ceremonial from the normal.

The dress of the people seems to have undergone some change since the time when Hesselmeyer wrote his accounts wherein he mentions the Hrussos wearing a 'profusion of silk cloth.'[33] Silk garments are not common now and seem to have given place to the more durable cotton apparel. Even women have adopted it in their dress.

Men usually tie their hair in the middle of the head in a knot while women wear it at the back.

V. ORNAMENTS

The Aka women wear a number of ornaments of silver, which are procured from the plains, as well as necklaces of beads. The common silver ornaments are *melu*—a flat-shaped ornament worn over the chest, *rombin*—the big ear-bulbs, *gichli*—the ear-rings and *gejjui*—the wristlets. Well-to-do women wear, besides these, a fillet of silver chain-work called *lenchhi.* All these ornaments are made in the plains of Assam from where they are purchased whenever the people visit these markets.

Along with these silver ornaments, women also

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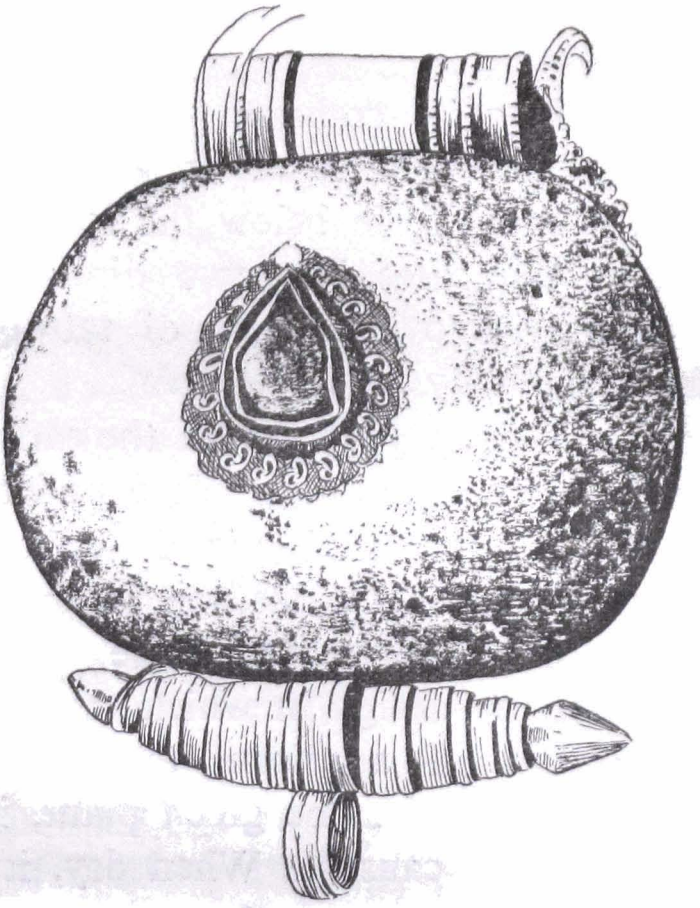
[33] C. H. Hesselmeyer, The Hill-Tribes of the Northern Frontier of Assam, *J. A. S. B.*, Vol. XXXVII (1868).

put on around the neck a number of coloured bead-necklaces. The Aka women are specially fond of these beads and put any number of them.



Melu—worn as a central piece in a necklace

An ancestral necklace, called *aescheri*, is worn invariably by women and often by men. It forms a necessary part of the gifts which a bride's parents give at her marriage. It is regarded as sacred and more valuable than other ornaments since it is a part of the ancestral property of the family.

In ornamentation of the body, the Aka women have not shown any basic change with the passage of time. They are as profuse in their wearing of ornaments today as they were in Kennedy's time, more

than four decades ago.[34] In fact, the more important or ceremonial an occasion, the greater is the care taken by the Aka women to decorate themselves.

VI. TATTOOING

Tattooing is quite common among the Akas. The women tattoo their faces in a pattern of a straight line running from below the forehead to the chin where it bifurcates into two directions. This is the commonly known pattern of tattooing. No other parts of the body are tattooed.

Tattooing is done generally in the early years of girlhood, round ten, but always before puberty. This also then means that tattooing is done before marriage, for marriages before this age are not common among the Akas. A scratch is made on the face, with an idea of the design in which the tattooing is desired, by means of a thorn, and resin, which may be obtained from some green plant, is poured into the wound thus caused. When dry, it leaves a permanent blue-black mark on the face.

There is no special class of tattooers in Aka society. Women of the house or neighbourhood help each other in tattooing their girls.

VII. DECORATIONS

Besides the permanent decoration made by tattooing, the girls are also in the habit of decorating their faces and lips by some artificial means. The

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[34] R. S. Kennedy, *Ethnological Report on the Akas, Khowas and Mijis and the Mombas of Tawang* (Shillong, 1914).

essence of wild pine, commonly known as *lingchong*, is used extensively for preparing these decorations. At weddings, the girls of the bride's village usually take delight in painting black the faces of the boys in the groom's party and the latter also return the compliment equally well by painting the faces of the girls. Such paintings usually cover the whole face.

VIII. ART

It might be necessary to exclude the Akas completely from a discussion of art, if we were to follow a strictly scientific definition of the subject which may require a higher aesthetic sense and an expert medium of expression. But if we are to agree with the wider view put forward by Dr Verrier Elwin, that 'it is the people themselves who are the real works of art in an area like this' and that 'most of their creative ability is lavished on the decoration of their own persons',[35] then we may claim a place for the Akas at least in the elementary forms of art. They are one of the people who not only tattoo their faces in artistic patterns and decorate them with artificial colours, but also know some tribal patterns of art.

The most common form of Aka art is their drawings on wood in their houses. At the entrance to a house in Karangania village, there are found some crude and simple drawings on a wooden frame, with some dots and length-wise lines displayed in an unsystematic way. The figures and lines in

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[35] Verrier Elwin, *The Art of the North-East Frontier of India* (Shillong, 1959).

these drawings are drawn usually with the liquid of *lingchong* (pine-resin), the essence of which gives black dye.

These drawings are associated with some socio-religious rites. They serve in a way to declare in explicit but symbolic form the desire of the individual who performs the ceremony to attain certain heights. It is said that, when a man aspires for some material attainment in life or wants to overcome his short-comings in a particular field, he performs a certain religious rite to appease the deity who can bless him with the desired end. On the last day of the ceremony, the person performing it, or someone on his behalf, who may have acquired some special skill in the work, makes these designs at the entrance of the house. The performer of the ritual, through these figures, puts forth explicitly his cravings, and raises prayers to the presiding deity to be blessed with as good a success or fortune in the desired sphere as the beautiful figures depicted there[36].

Whenever a fowl is sacrificed in some religious rite, then also similar drawings are made. It is meant thereby that they be blessed to remain free from evil influences as well as be protected against their own acts, so that, for example, a man going to hunt may not kill himself with his own weapon under some evil influence. This form of art among the Akas is, thus, always a part of some important socio-religious observance and, as such, is meaningful only in its own context.

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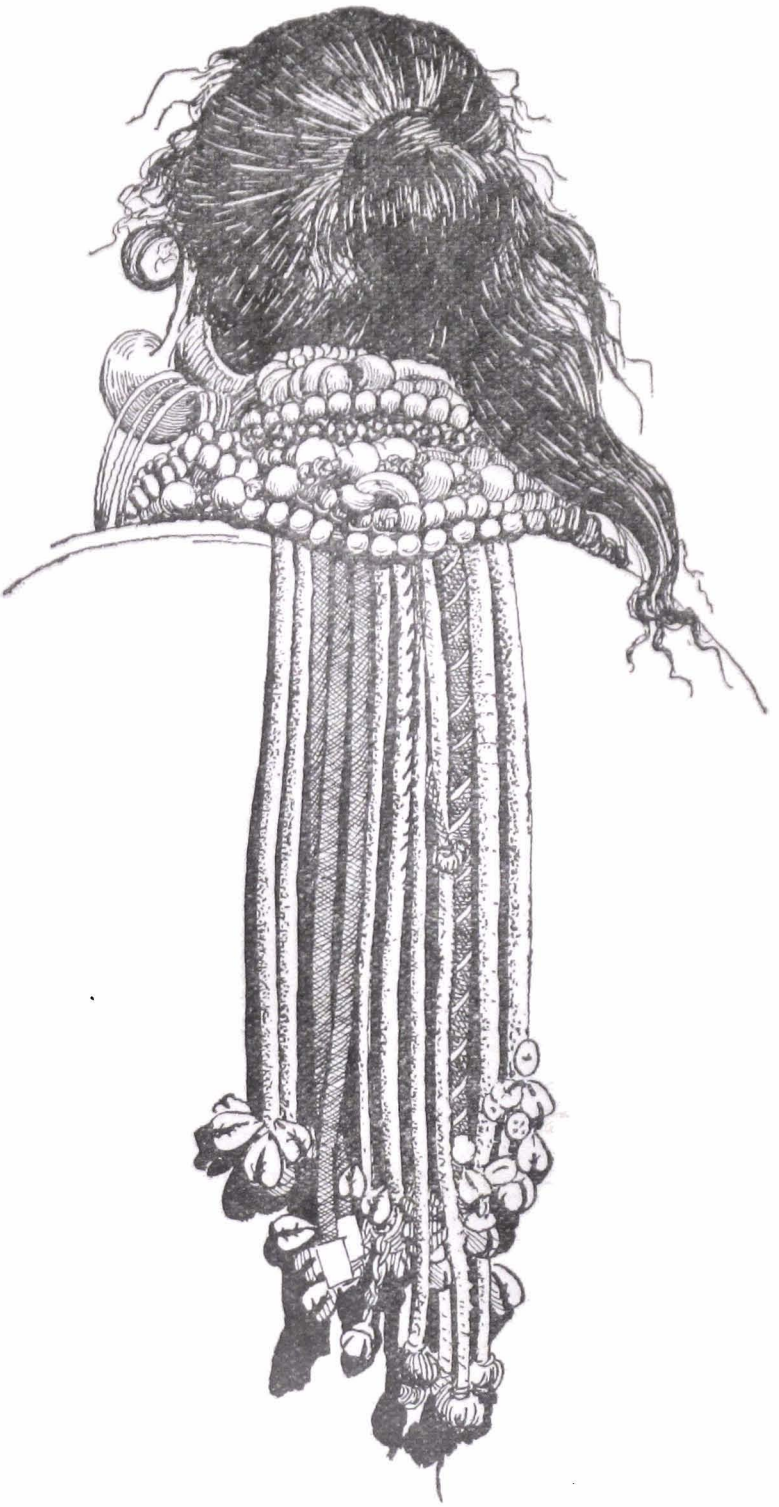
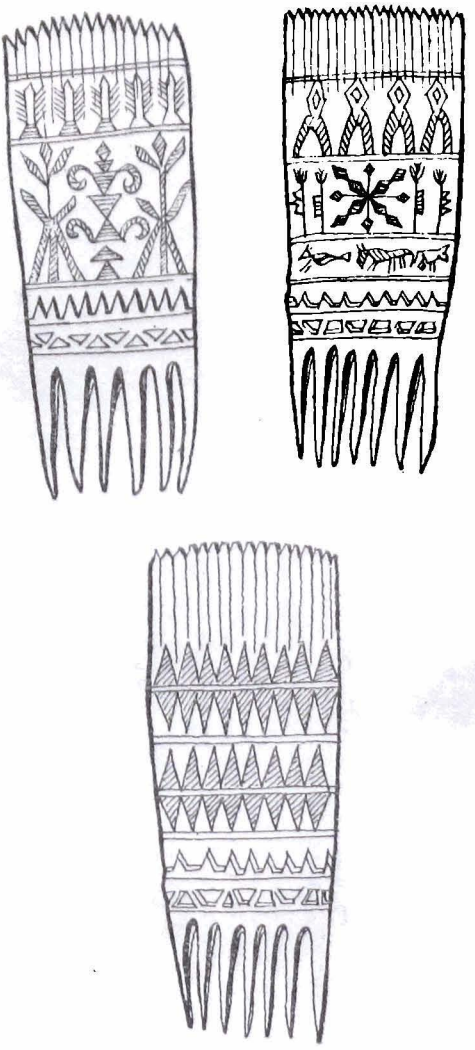
[36] See also chapter on Religion and Magic.

Girls husking and winnowing grain

An Aka girl at the loom



Woman's hair style with tassel



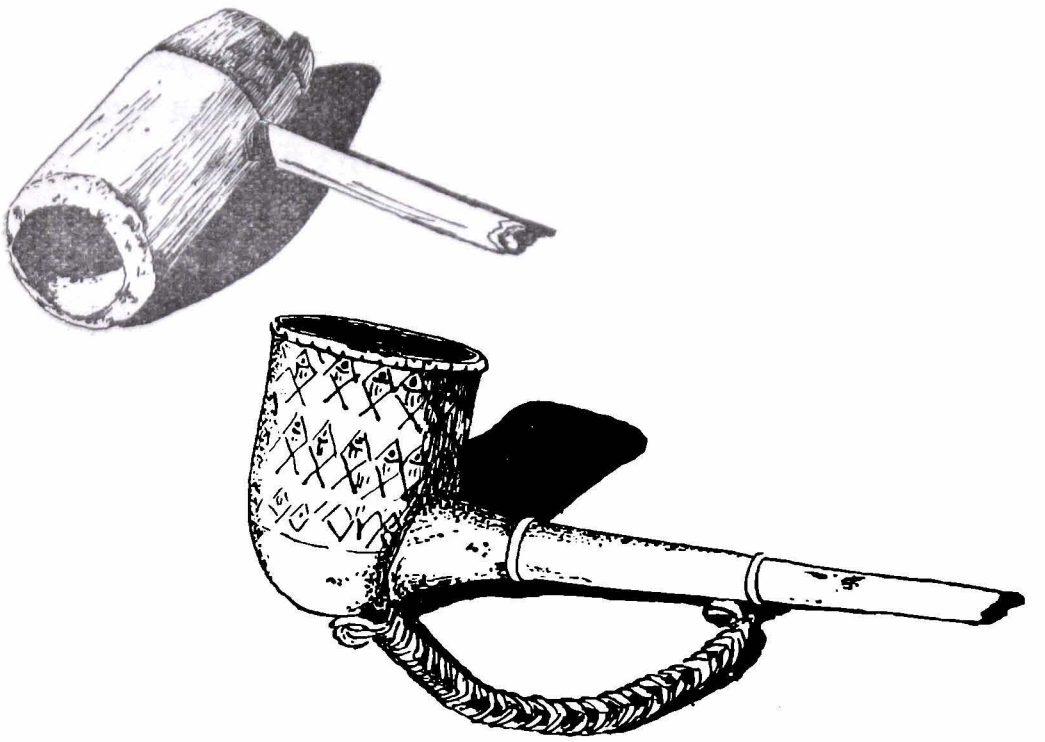
Aka comb made of bamboo with poker-work designs

IX. FOOD AND DRINK

The food and drink of the people are largely determined by the conditions in which they live. The main crops of the region thus figure principally in their staple food, while any other edible supplies, which they might collect by way of their food-gathering pursuits, take the form of their supplementary diet.

The staple food of the Akas consists mainly of maize, which may often be substituted or supple-

mented by millet. These cereals are taken in boiled form along with some vegetables which may be locally grown or gathered in the form of plants and tubers from the forest. Some local pulses, such as *shapoo* and *labenchi (urad* and a pulse similar to it), are also added to the food. Vegetables like sweet potatoes and *kochu*, wherever grown, are also taken. Rice is not grown much, hence is not a staple food.



Indigenous tobacco pipes

On many occasions—social and religious—the main diet is substantiated by meat, pork or beef, though none of these form their daily diet, except for a few persons who may afford it. In ordinary festivities, a pig or a goat is killed and all the members of the village community share the feast. Beef is taken less commonly since mithuns are killed only on

important social or religious occasions, to celebrate a marriage or to appease some deity. Fowls are, however, sacrificed much more frequently to celebrate most of the socio-religious ceremonies.

The Akas are very fond of smoking. It is a common sight to see both men and women with a tobacco-pipe. The bamboo-pipes are indigenous in most cases ; in a few cases, they are also procured from the plains.

They also take the wild betel with equal enthusiasm ; the lips of Aka women are often seen red amidst the black tattoo-marks on the face.

X. FOOD HABITS AND FOOD TABOOS

Whereas men enjoy themselves in feasts and festivities without any reservation, women are permitted to take only a few of the non-vegetarian dishes. A number of taboos restrict their food habits. They may take pork and beef but it is taboo for them to take fowls, which otherwise provide a favourite dish to the menfolk. Even the permitted dishes for women are further regulated by a number of other impositions ; the women are forbidden to take the brain and the legs of a mithun. Both men and women discard the portions of brain, legs and stomach while partaking of pig-flesh.

The food taboos on women are rigid and the people know of few lapses from them. It is a common and a strong belief among them that, if a woman dares to violate any of these socio-religious impositions, the supernatural agencies may inflict a heavy punishment on her. Such a supernatural

punishment would then badly disfigure her. She may have sores all over her face, and thus soon get wearied of her life. So strong is the power attributed to this supernatural agency and so great is the fear caused that a woman would not only avoid the tabooed dishes, but also take special care even not to take food prepared in some such pot which might have sometime contained them. The people have a legend related with the food taboo for women and it serves as a strict warning to them to this day. It says that once a person, either out of sheer mischief or in attempt to test the efficacy of the taboo, gave a woman the food prepared in a pot which had earlier contained the tabooed dish, and the result of it was that she had to curse her lot for the rest of her life as her face was badly covered with sores. Since then, no woman would dare even to think of disregarding the taboo.

Milk in any form or any preparations made from it are also tabooed for women. It is for this reason that they evince little interest in tea prepared with milk, or even with condensed milk in some of the houses, where the people going down to the plains, have learnt to bring occasionally a few tins of it home.

XI. ALCOHOLIC DRINKS AND THEIR PREPARATION

The alcoholic drinks in the tribal communities form an ingredient to the staple food of the people. The meal is supposed to be complete only with the addition of a drink. The staple drink of the Akas is *lao-pani.* It is prepared either from maize or millet. *Lao-pani* is taken three or even more times a day,

often along with food. The first bowl of *lao-pani* is taken in the early hours of morning. It may be taken a second time in the afternoon with the meal, and a third time in the evening when people may sit together with the family. It serves as a mild stimulant. *Lao-pani*, being a staple drink, is taken without reservation by all, men, women as well as children.

Mingri, the second alcoholic drink, is more intoxicating than *lao-pani*, but less intoxicating than *aarah*. The first drink of *mingri* may be taken in the morning, even before a drink of *lao-pani*. It may be taken a second time in the evening when men return from the day's toil and women are supposed to keep a bowl of *mingri* ready for them. *Mingri* also figures in feasts and festivities of the village along with the popular *lao-pani*.

Aarah is a distilled drink and is, therefore, more expensive. It is taken much less frequently than the other two drinks. It is largely served during the big festivities. The important social and religious ceremonies are not supposed to go without a drink of *aarah*.

There is no separate or common distillery in an Aka village as might be the case with some of the Central Indian tribes. Among the Akas, each house prepares drinks for its own use.

The above three alcoholic drinks are prepared from the same corn, maize or millet ; the varieties are dependent upon the alcoholic content.

Lao-pani, which is a mild brew and the most popular drink of the Akas, is prepared by a simple method. The corn (maize or millet) is first boiled in

adequate quantity of water, and is then allowed to cool. A herb, known by the local name of *fa*, is added to the liquid. After a day or two, the liquid ferments and can be taken for drink.

Mingri, the second variety in the alcoholic drinks of the people, is obtained from *lao-pani*. *Lao-pani*, on being heated further and allowed to ferment for some time more, yields *mingri*.

Kicchu—jar used for storing local drinks

Aarah, the highly distilled drink, requires an elaborate process for its preparation. *Lao-pani* is first boiled in a closed vessel over which another pot, containing water, is placed. An empty pot is kept in the vessel to collect the vapour on condensation. On heating, the boiling *lao-pani* yields vapour, which is then condensed and the condensate is collected in the

pot. After adequate fermentation, it can be used as a drink.

There is an interesting story which relates the discovery of the favourite drink of *lao-pani*. In the remote past, all the different peoples, Akas, Mijis, Daflas, Mishmis and so on, had a common ancestor called Buslo Aou.[37] He gave the *fa* herb to an animal called *khulpza dum* (similar to a rat). It had eaten only about half of it when another ancestor, called Sibjou Ache, snatched it away from its mouth. To determine its effect, Sibjou Ache experimented with it on a dog who gained considerably in health. The experiment was then repeated on a chicken who too grew more fleshy than it was ever before. Observing such extremely miraculous results, Sibjou Ache preserved it as an invaluable invigorant, and has passed the herb on to his posterity. Since that day, the herb has been brought into use by the people to prepare their drink from it.

The people have a strong belief that a drink of *lao-pani* tones up their energy.

[37] For further reference to this common ancestor, see also Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* (Shillong, 1959), pp. 169 ff.

THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

The economic organization of a people centres round their means of sustenance which include their occupations like agriculture, as well as the subsidiary means of livelihood like the collection of forest produce, and fishing and hunting. It also includes their trade within their own community as well as with other people.

I. AGRICULTURE

The Akas are essentially an agricultural people. Agriculture in the hilly areas of the Aka country naturally demands the Jhum or shifting type of cultivation. A tract of land is selected every year for agriculture and, after the forest growth over it has been removed, it is put to fire. The clearings in the forest thus made to serve as the field for cultivation and the seeds are sown over the ash. Jhum cultivation, wherever practised, thus involves two phases of agricultural activity, the first involving the preparation of land for cultivation, and the second comprising the cultivation proper. Agriculture of this type involves hard labour and thus often necessitates corporate activity. Men and women join together to share the toil.

The first phase of agriculture begins with the clearing of forest-land, which may start in the month

of January and continue upto the end of March. Both men and women go together to the forest; soon after reaching the spot, the division of work among them begins. Men occupy themselves with the more arduous tasks involving physical labour, such as felling big trees and removing the logs, while women are given lighter tasks like clearing the smaller growth. The implements used are *purje* (common axe) and *wetz* (dao). The clearing of the forest for Jhumming is known as *vichu* in the Aka dialect. It takes about three to four weeks to finish the entire operation, depending upon the size of the *pam* or the Jhum-field. The daily work during this period usually starts in the early hours of morning and continues till late in the afternoon. Boys and girls of over ten or twelve years of age may also take part in the operation.

The burning of the forest, the second activity towards the preparation of land for cultivation, starts after about a month. This gap between the two operations is necessary to allow the felled growth to dry. The lighting of fire thus usually takes place in the month of April. The whole patch may be burnt in about two or three days' time. The remaining halfburnt logs are cut again and removed to one place. The lighting of fire starts at noon and is essentially a man's job. The patch of land covered with ash thus becomes ready for cultivation. With the completion of this operation, the first phase of agriculture—the preparation of land for cultivation—is over. The task now ahead is the actual cultivation.

The cultivation of land, the second phase in

Jhumming, starts with the sowing of seed. An interim period of about three or four days is allowed to pass between the last and the next operation. Sowing of seed, which usually takes place in the month of April or May, is a simple job, and so is primarily entrusted to women. They take the seed in a basket, locally known as *biu*, remove a little earth and broadcast the seed on the soil. With the sowing of seed, the primary part of agriculture is practically dispensed with and the people now can have a temporary relief from the toil for about three or four months till the crops mature. All that now may be necessary is to keep a casual watch over the sown field to protect it against wild birds. This task is usually entrusted to the older children of the house, who learn from their very early life to live in the secluded parts of forest, away from their home. They may stay in batches of five to ten in the huts temporarily made for them in the *pam*. The parents may visit them there only now and then.

When the seeds begin to sprout, it becomes necessary to keep a strict and constant vigilance over the plants, for it is at this stage that wild animals like deer, the domesticated animals like pig and the semi-domesticated animals like mithun are likely to cause ravages to the growing crop. Rats are a common pest to agriculture, and destroy the crop even before the maturing stage. A fencing, usually of bamboo or of wooden logs, fixed vertically and across, is made around the field to protect the crop against animals. It also now becomes necessary to stay in the *pam*, if the fields are situated far away from

their habitation. In such cases, both men and women may stay in small huts made near the fields till the crops are harvested. The older people of the family may then be entrusted with the care of the main house in the village. When several people have their fields near each other, they may make their huts there and a *pam* may itself become a small habitation, and gradually assume the form of a small village.

The crops mature in about four or five months' time. The harvesting thus starts usually in the month of August, and is over by the end of September. Only crops, sown very early, are harvested in the month of July and those, sown rather late, are harvested in October. The harvesting is done by means of common dao. The harvest is then gathered at one place. The harvesting is primarily women's job though men also sometimes assist them. The ears of the corn are removed by menfolk after which the corn may be carried to the hut near the *pam*, where it may be exposed to the sun for about a fortnight to be dried. It is then be taken to the village to be stored in the granary. Each house builds its own granary or *nechi*, as it is called in the local dialect, either by its side or quite close to it.

Only the crop of paddy, which is not very common in this region, requires husking and winnowing which is done in the usual way known to the peasants of the plains.

The common crops are maize[38] and millet.[39] Paddy[40] is grown only on a limited scale in a small

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[38] *Sibei.* [39] *Kachai.* [40] *Oa.*

area. Besides these, a few pulses are also grown, common among which are *urad* or *mas*[41] and some pulses similar to it.[42] French-beans[43] are also grown in some parts. Some vegetables, such as potatoes[44], sweet potatoes[45] and *kochu*[46] are grown in the kitchen gardens. Peas[47] are grown only to a limited extent in some parts. A wild plant[48], which grows edible roots, is also used as food.

Shifting cultivation remains the principal and the only method of agriculture for the Akas. If the soil is good, it can be used again for cultivation in the following year ; otherwise it has to be abandoned for seven or eight years and a new tract of land has to be selected for Jhumming every year. Within this period of about eight years, the fallow land again becomes covered with thick forest growth and may be used for re-cultivation, repeating the usual cycle of Jhumming operations.

II. AGRICULTURAL RITES

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the people, and thus to ensure its success, some rites are supposed necessary before the agricultural operations of the year begin. At the time of sowing, the local village priest is summoned. He ties a piece of white cloth to a big bamboo pole in the form of a pennant, which is planted in the *pam* or the Jhum-field. The priest then chants some spells and raises

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[41] *shapoo*, [42] *labenchi* and *libi*, [43] *librapa*, [44] *lasanekchi*, [45] *alu*, [46] *chho*, [47] *fulbji*, [48] *wenekchi*.

These are the local names of the grains, pulses and vegetables mentioned above.

prayers to the deity responsible for agriculture to ward off damages to the crops either by wild animals or by natural pests. A piece of *lingchong* (pine-wood) is lighted and the owner is allowed to put the first seed in the field. The sowing starts with the performance of this rite.

Similarly, at the time of the harvest, the priest is summoned to plant the pennant in the field and to burn the incense. The harvesting of the crop follows only then. Besides these, some other religious ceremonies have to be performed from time to time. All these rites in a way aim at safeguarding the interests of the agriculturist.

III. SUBSIDIARY MEANS OF SUBSISTENCE

While the people depend primarily upon agriculture for their sustenance, they also fish and practise hunting to some extent. Food-gathering is an important part of their occupations and a supplementary source of livelihood.

(i) *Fishing*

Fishing is practised largely as a pastime occupation. It is not as common as the food-gathering pursuit. The fish are caught on the river banks by several methods, such as by bamboo-traps and fishing-nets. Fishing, however, does not play any important part in the economy of the people.

(ii) *Hunting*

Hunting too is practised on a limited scale. The people go on for chase of animals whenever they have time and convenience. Big game is not very com-

mon. The weapons of hunting and chase are the common bow and arrow.[49] Birds are shot whenever the people move in the forest or whenever there is an opportunity for it.

(iii) *Food-gathering*

The country abounds in edible plants and leaves which are gathered in large numbers for about six months of the year, or even more, to supplement the food supply. A small wild plant, which grows in the forest and is locally known as *fumpin*, is gathered for about six months of the year. The leaves of this plant are prepared as other vegetables and used with the cereals. Another common plant, called *pasa*, is gathered almost throughout the year. The collection of forest produce falls within the province of the womenfolk. The food-gathering pursuits among the Akas, however, do not involve co-operative activity as among the premier food-gatherers of India. Women in small groups, or even individually, collect the edible plants from the forest whenever they need. It is a matter mostly of necessity and convenience, depending, of course, on the season during which these wild plants and roots may grow. Elder children, particularly the girls, may join the women of the house in collecting the forest produce to supplement their food.

IV. TRADE AND BARTER

Trade among the Akas does not involve any complex process. The indigenous methods of trade

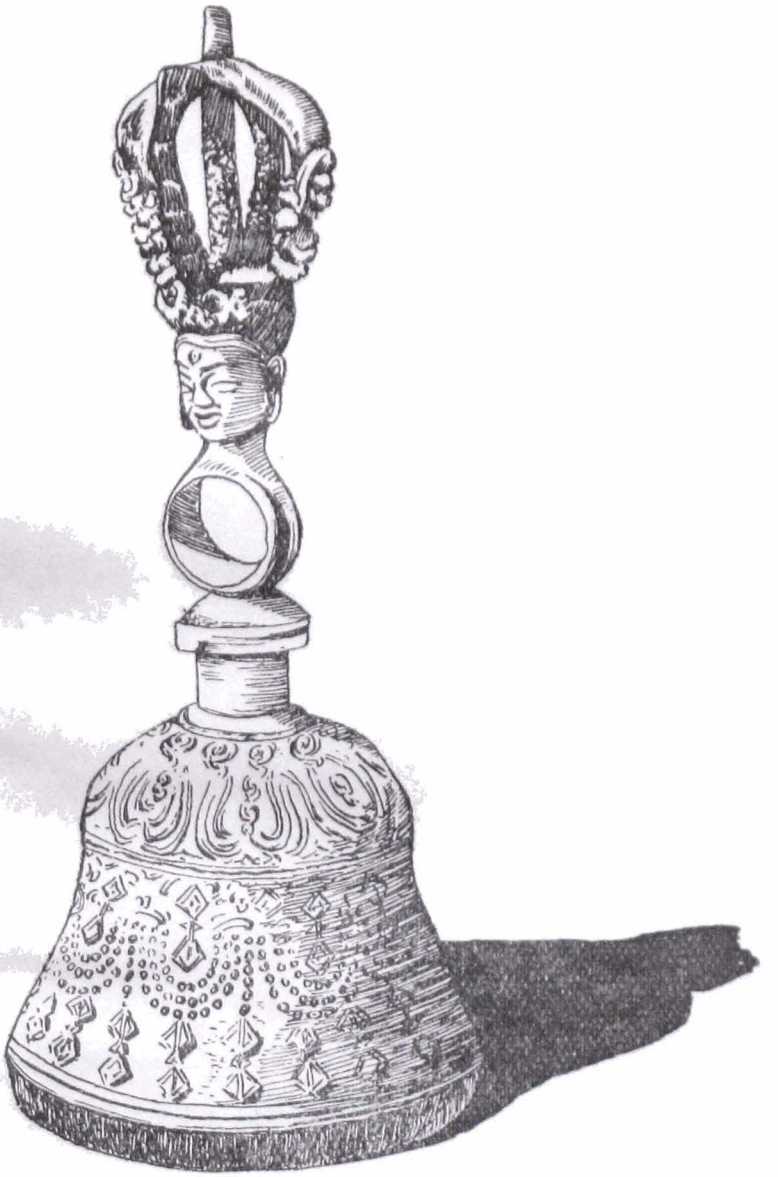
[49] See the chapter on Domestic Life.

are simple in nature and barter plays an important part in these transactions. The trade of the Akas, as such, is of two kinds : one which they carry on among themselves and what can be conveniently called the 'inter-village' trade, and secondly, their trade with the plains.

The first is the main kind of trade practised through the barter system. When the people of an Aka village have some surplus in grains, say maize or millet, which they want to exchange for some other commodity of the neighbouring village, which may be paddy or sweet potatoes, they intimate their intention to the people of the other village and the two decide in mutual consultation as to the date and time for the transaction of the business. The parties usually meet half-way between the two villages on the appointed day and exchange their commodities. There is not much bargaining and the whole business can be dispensed within a very short time after which the parties return to their respective villages.

The system of barter is more practicable in the mutual trade between their own villages and to some extent with the neighbouring Bangni people with whom they often come into contact for trade purposes. In their trade with the people in the plains, they have to deal essentially in cash. The occasions for the latter kind of trade arise only when they go down to the plains and when they take the local produce, in which fowls figure prominently, for sale there. With the money they get in return for their commodities, they usually purchase things of their necessity like cloth, silver ornaments and utensils.

Their trade with the plains has introduced good deal of currency among them. It has, however, neither affected their inter-village trade nor their indigenous barter.



'*Deoghanti*'—prayer bell

V. TRADE ROUTE

The common route, which the Akas have been following for a long time for their trade with the

plains, is the tribal track which goes from their village Jamiri to Bhalukpung, situated at the border of Assam, and is connected with Charduar by road. Large numbers of Akas visit the plains of Assam through this common route for trade and other reasons.

FOUNDATIONS AND STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY

The social organization of a tribal community is the super-structure which it raises on the basis of social norms, values, laws and traditions, and social institutions, following a definite pattern.

I. ORGANIZATION OF SOCIETY

(a) *The Tribe*

The Akas are a small tribe who know themselves as Hrussos. A sub-division of the tribe is known as Khromes or Miri-Akas, and as such distinguished from the former. They live rather isolated from the Hrussos but enjoy free social relations with them.[50] The Aka tribe is further sub-divided into a number of clans organized on the principle of clan-exogamy. The tribe is a compact social group which maintains its solidarity by enforcing certain social laws and regulations, supported by tradition, by which all social contacts outside the tribal group are made impossible to its members. Infiltration of any kind from outside is not allowed in any case.

The first social rule to insure the solidarity of the tribe is the rule of tribal endogamy. It forces the members of the tribe to marry strictly and necessarily within the tribal group. Any lapse from

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[50] The probable view for their separation has been discussed earlier (pages 6-7).

this social rule would result in foreign infiltrations and break the very foundation of the tribal solidarity, and hence is punishable. It even involves the expulsion of the social culprit from the community by enforcing upon him a social boycott or excommunication from the village. Any marital relations with the Mompas, Khowas, Daflas and Sherdukpens, the other tribes living in the division, thus involve heavy punishment by the village council. The only concession in this respect is that of permitted social relations of the Akas with the Mijis. The two tribes have come close to each other in course of their history, partly by geographical neighbourhood and partly by common social outlook. The Akas and the Mijis today enjoy social relations with each other.

(b) *The Village Community*

The unit of Aka society is the village community. The Aka village community consists of the total population of the local village, which is essentially homogeneous with a few exceptions like that of Dijungania where some Mijis and Daflas have also settled. Everything relating to society or having a bearing upon the people in general is decided at the village level. The communal always supersede the individual considerations. Even individual functions like marriage and religious rites call for communal co-operation.[51] Similarly, co-operation of

[51] The word 'communal' has been used here in its literal sense to mean 'pertaining to the community' and not in its misrepresentative implication in which it is now-a-days understood in the political parlance.

the village community is also sought in individual work like house-building. The religious festivities, though celebrated on an individual basis, conclude with a community feast.

The community is also the centre of the political organization of the village. Its decisions become legally binding upon the local individuals. On the one hand, it lays down moral obligations on the part of the individuals, expecting a minimum fulfilment of them as a social agency, on the other hand, it imposes an authoritative control over them as an administrative unit. The village community is, in fact, the integrating force in the Aka society.

(c) *The Clans*

The clans are the further sub-divisions of the tribe. They are based on an assumption of common origin—the members of the clan regarding themselves to be the descendants of a common ancestor and thus avoiding marital relations with the members of their own clan-group. Wherein marriage within tribal group is made compulsory, the members of the different clans of the tribe are required to marry strictly outside their own sub-group. Since the clan members regard themselves to be of the common blood, any marriage within one's own clan would be tantamount to marriage within one's own family, thus causing the breach of incest taboo, and hence restricted by the rule of clan-exogamy. The rule of clan-exogamy is as strict in nature as the rule of tribal endogamy. Tribal endogamy and clan exogamy thus go together in Aka society as in all

societies, and are in no way contradictory to each other.

Each of the Aka villages has its specific clans which are limited to the village boundary. Only three villages, Buragaon, Hushigaon and Jamiri have the common clans which freely inter-marry under the normal rule of clan-exogamy.

The following are the principal clans of the Akas.

Village	*Clans*
Buragaon, Hushigaon and Jamiri	Dussusow, Khabijisow, Jebisow, Sichisow, Paljin.
Dijungania	Chidisow, Fomusow, Paryusow, Galosow.
Karangania	Sagrasama, Kerlusama, Tipesa, Tirin
Yayong	Chhidasow, Wechsow.
Sakrin	Jesusow, Sasusow, Rugzusow, Fushisow.
Palathari	Palathari.

Clan-exogamy in Aka society is usually accompanied by village-exogamy. The members of the clan, besides being required to marry outside their own clan-group, have also to cast their choice outside the village. Thus a boy of Chidisow clan of Dijungania, besides avoiding a marriage with a girl of his own clan, has to select his mate even outside the Fomusow, Paryusow or Galosow clans of his village, and should preferably marry in Karangania or in some other Aka village. The belief associated with the law of village-exogamy is that the different clans of the same village have branched out from

the same common ancestor. They believe, for instance, that the Chidisow, Fomusow, Paryusow and Galosow, which are today the names of the different clans, were originally the names given to the four sons of a father and the generations of these sons have adopted the names of their respective ancestors as the names for their particular clans which they retain to this day. Since the ancestors of these clans were brothers in relation, their generations (the present clans) in the village are regarded as parallel cousins to each other. Any marriage between them is supposed to be a marriage within one's own blood-kins, and is thus restricted. Whereas this social restriction on village-endogamy is followed into the more interior villages like Dijungania and Karangania, the people of villages like Buragaon, Hushigaon and Jamiri seem to manifest a tendency of deviation from the norm, and have lately started marrying within their own village though, of course, outside their own clan-groups. The older people of these villages generally attribute the change to the younger generations. The rule of clan exogamy, however, remains as rigid in all the Aka villages as it might have been at any time in the past and any breach of the rule still involves heavy punishment by the village community.

There is no class system known to the Akas. All the clans enjoy an equal social footing and there is no dogma of higher or lower creed associated with any of them. However, the people of the three Aka villages, Buragaon, Hushigaon and Jamiri, do not freely entertain the idea of marriage-relations

with the members of Sichisow clan who are permitted to marry only with the members of Jebisow clan. As the rule of tribal endogamy safeguards the interests of the tribe, the rule of clan-exogamy keeps intact the clan organization.

(d) *The Family*

The family in Aka society is the primary unit of the individual life in the same way as the village community is the unit of society. The Aka family comprises the husband, the wife and their children. The sons stay with their parents till they attain maturity and are married in their turn, after which they separate from the parental roof to found their individual families. The daughters on marriage go to live with their husbands and become henceonwards the members of their families. The parental family thus eventually splits into individual families in either case, and returns to the same stage from where it had started, consisting of the husband and the wife. Joint families are not popular among the Akas.

The sons may not separate from their parents immediately after marriage but such a separation becomes almost necessary as soon as the first child is born. But even where such a division of family may become necessary, at least one of the sons has necessarily to stay back with the parents to look after them. This is more or less a social convention, rather an obligatory duty on their part which is discharged sincerely.

As to who among the sons should be the person to stay with the parents, there is no fixed rule. It is

largely a matter of mutual adjustment between the parents and the son and often the personal choice of the former decides the issue. Naturally, this son has more privileges than his brothers since he is the eventual successor to the parental property and the household. Of course, he does not get any share at the time of the division of property among his other brothers, but it does not mean much to him as the share, which would ultimately come to him by way of inheritance of the parental property, is far larger than what may go to any of his brothers under the regular distribution. None of his brothers can have any legal claim over it. It is only on the generosity and goodwill of the inheritor that they may hope to get a part of it.

At the time of the separation of the sons from the parental roof, the proper distribution of property among them is made. In such a division, the law of primogeniture normally prevails as a part of social convention. All the sons get an equal share in the property of their father except the eldest, who may get a little more than his brothers. However, in principle at least, the law of primogeniture stands in conflict with the practical arrangements, since the son, who stays back with the parents and inherits their property in due course, getting thus more share in effect than his brothers, is not necessarily the eldest.

Such a division of the family and the distribution of the property generally affects all the articles of the household which may be included in the list of property of the family, except the ancestral ornaments which are kept reserved for the girls to be given to

them at the time of their marriage. Besides these ornaments, the girls do not get any other share in their father's property. The division of property among the brothers thus usually means the distribution of cattle, utensils, cloth, hearths and other household articles of daily use. Land is not subject to division, partly because it is changeable every year, and partly because it is acquired by one's own toil. House is also not a part to this division as, firstly, the parents may themselves need it for their shelter and, secondly, it cannot serve the purpose of all the families. The distribution worked out by the father is accepted as final by his sons and usually no disputes arise over this arrangement.

At the time of parting from the parental roof, the sons have an obligation to fulfil towards the parents. Each of them, according to his will and capacity, contributes some cloth, utensils, pigs and other things of the household that may be at his disposal at the time. The contribution is usually entrusted to them in the presence of the villagers who may gather there for the community feast given by parting people. It is considered rather necessary on the part of the sons to invite all the members of the village community on such an occasion. This is more or less a social approval sought to affect the division of the family.

The division of family among the Akas, however, does not presuppose any outstanding differences between the members of the parental family. It is largely an arrangement arrived at for reasons of practical convenience and partly to ward off the possi-

bility of contempt and dispute which are likely to follow in the joint system.

II. THE PATTERN OF SOCIETY

The Akas have an essentially patriarchal society. The patrilocal residence is combined with patriarchal descent and patrimonial inheritance of property. Since girls go to live with their husbands after marriage, it is only the sons who inherit the family descent as well as the property from their father. Moreover, the paternal kins are regarded nearer and sacred in relationship than the maternal kins. It is on these patriarchal lines of society that the foundations of clan and family are laid.

III. THE SLAVE SYSTEM

Aka society freely entertains the idea of slavery. The slaves, known as *khulo*, are not a part of society but form a separate class by themselves outside the social structure of the Akas, though living with them in the same village. The slaves are recruited usually from amongst the Sulungs. They may be purchased by the people from their Bangni neighbours against mithun and cloth. The common price for a slave is two mithuns and a piece of cloth ; besides, a pig may be sacrificed to ceremonise the deed.

The person once recruited as a slave remains a slave for the whole life, marries only a slave girl and the children of the slave-parents inherit slavery from them as a liability. Even the remote generations of a slave can hardly hope to ever get rid of slavery.

The slaves are allowed to marry within their own

groups. They are not supposed to have any social relations with their master's society. Extra-marital relations of a slave with the women of the master's family, or of Aka society in general, are tried to be concealed in the first instance since the publicity of such affairs is only likely to result in social ridicule. Only a strong warning may be given to them, in such a case, for violating the social norm.

The *khulo* have to till the soil, look after the *pam* and the Jhum-field, the cattle and the household and do all such menial jobs as their masters may entrust to them. In return for their services, they are given food and clothing. The masters also help them in getting married in time, and as such, the liabilities of a slave go on increasing with every generation. The slaves, who may have either inherited the bondage from their parents or may have been recruited afresh, cannot hope to pay back the amount spent upon them, apart from the obligations which they stand on their parents' account, and have thus to remain under slavery for their life. Any hope of freedom from the bondage remains practically abandoned for them.

The general position of slaves in Aka society is not as extremely bad as we might anticipate under the system. The treatment meted out to them by their masters is not totally devoid of humanitarian considerations ; it is, on the other hand, often humane and sympathetic. They get consideration while working in the field or doing some other manual labour. The masters generally do not maintain much difference with them so far as the sharing of field-toil is concerned. The slaves may have to work hard,

A group of boy dancers

The Aka Rani of Hussigaon

but nevertheless their masters do have to provide for their minimum requirements in return for their services. The *khulo* are virtually the menial servants with the further imposition that the services are compulsory. They are slaves in the sense that they do not have a right of liberation. Slavery in Aka society is not as extensive as among the Bangnis and the practice is gradually falling into disuse. Active measures are also being taken by the Administration to bring it to an end, but in a way that will not too abruptly disturb Aka economy[52].

IV. THE PLACE OF THE 'RANI' IN AKA SOCIETY

A special feature of Aka society is its 'Rani' system. The prevalence of such an institution in a democratic society like the Aka indeed arouses an inquisitive interest.

The two most important Aka villages, Jamiri and Hushigaon, each has a Rani. The Ranis are the descendants of the royal family of the Akas who were ruling the Aka country till a few decades back. The descent has since then been inherited and it is as the successors to that royal lineage that the Ranis of the two villages are given high social honour to this day, not only in their own villages, but also by the Aka society in general.

The local term for 'Rani' is 'Nugum', though the former is in current usage among the people. The term 'Nugum' is today denotative of wealth

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[52] For measures taken by the Administration to eliminate slavery in NEFA, see Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA* (Shillong, 1959), p. 223 ff.

position and economic stability. But like the institution of Nichleu-Nuggo, it also entails a moral responsibility. The Rani is supposed to be the patron of her village. Since she has a privileged position, she is expected to substantially help the needy people of the village, particularly those who may be having no other support to look forward to. Co-operativeness and hospitality are supposed to be her inherent virtues.

The Ranis also command a place of respect and influence in the political life of the village. Though their role in the political or administrative capacity might now seem to be formal, the importance, that is still given to their advice, shows the possibility of the supreme position they might have been occupying not long before. They are invited to all meetings of the village council and their counsel is taken for all important issues of the village. Their opinion carries much weight. They generally entertain the members of the village councils to feasts after the meeting in which they might have taken part.

V. THE IDEAL INDIVIDUAL IN SOCIETY

Life in tribal societies is more communal than individual in the sense that an individual has to fulfil a number of obligations towards his society for which he gets the co-operation and assistance of the community even in the discharge of his individual tasks. It is a sort of adjustment between the two.

Rank and property among the Akas are the two main determinants of an individual's status. Yet they are not the only factors ; beyond them, there is a

vast field open to him to attain a status of dignity by his personal talents and sociability. It is, in fact, the co-operative and adjustive attitude and the knack for hard work which raise him to the supreme honour of Nichleu-Nuggo.[53]

The conception of Nichleu-Nuggo in Aka society is a conception of an ideal individual. The honour of Nichleu-Nuggo is, however, not hereditary ; it is secured by one's own efforts and personal capacity. For the Akas, a person who has the spirit of service and tolerance, is ever-ready to extend his co-operation in matters of social interest, makes good use of his wealth in helping the destitute, and yet does not think much of himself, is an ideal individual. As such, he commands the supreme respect from the members of his village community, gains their confidence, and is proclaimed almost unanimously as a Nichleu-Nuggo. The honour bestowed on him also brings fresh responsibilities in its train. Even after an individual has risen to the position of the highest social honour, he cannot afford to ignore his duties. Acquisition of the status of Nichleu-Nuggo does not mean that he can ignore the social virtues. On the other hand, he has to still further strengthen his sociable qualities to such an extent that he meets the general expectations of the people, and thus keeps his position secured. Such an honour, which he may get on the almost unanimous consent of the village community, is bestowed

[53] *Nichleu* in local language means a 'village' and *Nuggo* means a 'big man'. Nichleu-Nuggo is thus the social title for the person who has been socially recognized as the 'big man' or the 'chief of the village'.

on him only after sufficient conviction about his merits.

Every Aka village is supposed to have a Nichleu-Nuggo. Nowadays the Gaon Burah of a village, who is the head of the local political organization, normally combines in him the social honour of Nichleu-Nuggo since it is, after all, the local people of a village who select a person to both these offices, political and social. As there are no two opinions about the local chieftainship, so also there is usually no dispute over the award of the social honour which broadly requires that the person, elected for the office, should, besides every thing else, command the local leadership. Yet the two terms are not necessarily synonymous. There may be instances where a Gaon Burah may fail to secure the title of the highest social honour from his community.

With the achievement of the honour, the responsibilities of a Nichleu-Nuggo multiply to a great extent. His advice is sought and relied on on all important socio-religious as well as administrative issues of the village. At times of conflict between two villages, he is required to act as a negotiator and a mediator. It is, in fact, the Nichleu-Nuggo of the two villages who may act as mediators between them and arrive at a truce, and thus ultimately induce them to reconcile their differences. It is at such a critical time that a Nichleu-Nuggo may perform the greatest social role as an apostle of peace. In normal times too, the Nichleu-Nuggo has to take an active part in the affairs of his village, whether they may relate to the social, economic, political or religious sphere. It

is he who conducts and guides most of the proceedings of the village council meetings, and often helps to arrive at conciliatory decisions by his individual effort.

VI. THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Women in Aka society, as in most of the tribal communities of the world, enjoy a better status than many women in sophisticated societies. An Aka woman is not merely a wife who bears children to her husband and does the domestic tasks laid down for her. She is in no way a drudge. On the other hand, she is an equal partner to her husband throughout his life. She keeps pace with him in most of his economic pursuits. She works with him in the fields to clear the forest for cultivation, sows the seed and harvests the crop, and supplements the food supplies of the house by food-gathering. She also shares with her husband many socio-religious observances. The larger field of her activity prevents her from being a non-entity. She, on the other hand, becomes an asset to her husband's family and to secure her for life-partnership the husband willingly accepts economic obligations.

The institution of polygyny also does not affect her position in any way. Whenever a man decides to bring home a second woman, he has to first take counsel of his wife, and find out if she is willing to accept a helping hand. And her opinion remains final.

VII. DIVISION OF LABOUR IN AKA SOCIETY

'Within local communities in the simplest of societies' remarks Dr Carl C. Taylor, 'there are

always at least age and sex groups. Whether from the beginning there were occupational groupings, other than those based on age and sex, we cannot know. But in all primitive societies which we have studied firsthand, there are groupings based on a division of labour between social functions and responsibilities. Not even all adults, men or women, do the same things.'[54]

In a tribal society like the Aka, where men and women have to share together the economic burden to eke out a living, any hard and fast rule of division of work between them is not practicable. Women assist their men in a number of ways, and (as I have already said) work hand-in-hand with them throughout the agricultural operations. A theoretical division of labour among men and women is in fact impossible. It is the practical limitations which roughly demarcate the line of work for the two sexes. Men occupy themselves with tough jobs, while those jobs, which might require endurance but not much physical strain, are entrusted to women. Thus, while clearing the forest for cultivation is largely the work of men, the women-folk may assist them in it by removing shrubs and other small growth. Similarly, while women are exempted from the burning of the forest, they have to do the sowing and the harvesting almost by themselves. In industries, men do the harder work of basketry and women engage themselves in weaving bags where practised.

There is also a division of labour on the basis of

[54] Carl C. Taylor, *Community Mobilization and Group Formation* (New Delhi).

age. A child over seven or eight years of age has normally to share work with the elder people of the house. If he is a boy, he brings firewood, gathers edible forest produce and looks after the kitchen-garden. If he is a little more grown-up, he has to live in the jhum-field with other boys of the village to keep a watch over the growing crop. A girl of the same age brings water from the stream, gathers firewood, tends the younger children of the family, and assists her mother in the work of the home. She has also to share many other jobs with the boys of her own age-group, such as gathering forest produce and looking after the garden. As the boys and girls advance in age, they begin to shoulder more and more responsibilities with the elder members of the family, and adopt the jobs of their own particular sphere.

VIII. THE SOCIAL BOND

Like all other tribal communities, Aka society follows its own pattern of social norms, values and usages. It has retained its distinctive identity by preserving this social pattern. To insure it, society enforces a number of social laws and regulations to check any disruptions from within. As soon as infiltrations of any kind from outside enter the community, the disintegrating forces begin to play their part and the tribal group loses its solidarity; hence the various social restrictions. With the same aim in view, the Aka community also tries to keep its members united into the social bond of 'common groupism'. The members of society are made to feel that they belong to a common group, and have com-

mon interests by marrying strictly within the tribe and limiting their commensal habits within the social group. The enforced rules of tribal endogamy and clan-exogamy, together with the rule of commensalism, act as a strong check against any tendencies of deviation from the social norm. The rule of social excommunication further wards off any possibilities of its violation. It is thus these social agencies which act as the strongest bond for Aka society.

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND USAGES

The study of social institutions and usages is of great importance in understanding a society. It is these specific institutions and customs that basically differentiate a tribal community from the others.

I. THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

Marriage serves as the foundation-stone of the family. With the formation of the marital relationship, the husband and wife form a family-unit which, to start with, comprises the husband and wife but in which, later on, the children born to them also enter as members and remain so till they grow into adults, and are married in their turn. Marriage in Aka society, as in all other societies, is a turning-point in the life history of an individual from where he branches off from the parental roof and founds a new unit. A girl on her marriage abandons her parent's house, and goes to live with her husband.

Marriage in Aka society can take shape in two ways, either by the more common way of negotiation or by the romantic way of capture. The first is the traditional and more popular system of marriage, while the latter too, though depending more upon one's tactfulness rather than on mutual negotiations, is a socially approved practice.

II. MARRIAGE BY NEGOTIATION

Marriage by negotiation is generally initiated from the boy's side. The boy who has seen a girl or known her for some time past and has made up his mind to marry her, may give an indication of his desire to his parents. They then call the Mugou (village priest) to examine the auspiciousness of the proposal. The Mugou makes his diagnosis by killing a fowl and reading through divination the favourable or unfavourable signs contained therein. With the obtaining of a favourable opinion from the Mugou, the first step towards the settlement of marriage is supposed to have been covered, for it is here that a proposal may break down as few would dare to conclude a marriage in spite of the unfavourable premonitions of the priest. If the omen turns hopeful, a go-between is summoned to initiate the marriage proposal on behalf of the boy's family. The go-between or the Mukhou, as he is known, may be a relative of the boy or some elderly person of his village community. He plays the most important role in negotiating the marriage on behalf of the boy's parents and success or failure of the proposal depends largely upon his intelligence and tactfulness. If the two parties reach a settlement, the credit is often attributed to the initiative and personal efforts of the Mukhou.

The Mukhou knows, of course, the fundamental things necessary to initiate the negotiations, such as the bride-price the parents are willing to pay and the time when they want the marriage to take place. He travels to the girl's village, meets her parents and

tells them about the boy's desire to marry their daughter and that his parents approve. He assures them that the proposal has been duly examined by the priest and declared to be favourable. With this, he also gives them an idea of the amount of bride-price. If the parents of the girl agree to the proposal, the go-between returns to his village to convey the news to the boy's parents. He may be sent a second time to the girl's house to settle other preliminaries to marriage. Often he has to pass between the two parties twice or thrice, for a marriage is not supposed to be auspicious, if it is settled during the very first visit of the negotiator. The date of marriage is fixed in consultation with the girl's parents. The time of marriage is calculated by counting the number of knots bound with a piece of cane-string. The number of knots indicate the days which are required to pass before the marriage may be celebrated. The first string of knot brought by the negotiator is, however, of only formal importance since the marriage never takes place according to the first plan. To do so, the people believe, is only to invite a bad omen. It is believed that, if the first programme of marriage is not altered by a secondary fixture, one of the parties, either the bride or the bridegroom, may be visited by some evil influence in later life. It is an attempt to avert this danger that the first plan is always allowed to be passed off and a second piece of string has to be brought from the girl's house to know of the next and the final programme. The date fixed upon this time remains definite and final for the marriage ceremony.

In return for his services in negotiating the marriage and in helping the people to reach an agreement, the Mukhou is paid a good remuneration. This is usually paid in the form of the gift of *aeschperi* (or *udhan*, as it is known in Assamese)—an iron hearth-stand. If the union proves happy, the Mukhou can always boast of his part in it. Both parties sincerely acknowledge his part in uniting them together.

III. MARRIAGE CEREMONY

Around the date of marriage, the marriage party comprising the groom, his parents and relatives and some of the members from village, starts in a procession for the bride's village, where the marriage is to take place. All their way on the journey, the party makes a lot of noise. On reaching every hill-top, they make a loud shout of 'Ho'. As they arrive at the village entrance, they signal their arrival again by a shout. At this, the people of the bride's house, accompanied by other villagers, come to receive them. They also give a small feast to the guests at the place of the first meeting. After the feast, the members of the groom's party march to the bride's house with their hosts. When they approach the bride's house, they again raise a loud shout, and their hosts pull out their swords (daos) as a sign of resistance. The groom's party also pretends a similar gesture and there ensues a mock fight between the two parties for a couple of minutes, with the brandishing of swords in the air. Ultimately, the bride's people feign to yield and allow the groom's party to enter the house. This demonstration of a mock fight between the two

parties seems to be a cultural survival from the times when runaway marriages might have been quite common.

The hosts arrange a big feast in honour of the marriage guests later in the day. The function, which includes songs and dances by the girls of the village, continues till late at night. Almost all the villagers participate in the ceremony. While the older people may return to their homes after some time, the youths continue to sing and dance the whole night.

On the following day, the people of the groom's party have to play host to the bride's people in a feast arranged by them. A mithun brought with them is killed for the feast. Later in the day, while the groom's people may take rest in their camp, the people of the bride's house discuss among themselves the remaining details of the marriage like the marriage gifts to the bride.

Sometime during the day, the elder women of the bride's village dress themselves as men and join the groom's party to gossip and joke with them. The fancy dress of the women and their merry-making creates much fun and frolic among the members of both parties and they immensely enjoy the novelty.

The third day begins with some other jovial features. The girls of the bride's village take a ceremonial liberty to play jokes with the youths in the groom's party. They prepare a special blackish paint from wild pine (which they call *muphori* and which is also commonly known as *lingchong*), and paint the faces of the boys at the first opportunity. The boys also return the compliment with equal enthusiasm and

black-paint the girls' faces. This joking goes on for almost the whole day. Lest the boys may take these jokes ill, the elderly people from among the hosts brief them with the custom on the very day of their arrival in the village.

On all nights during the marriage-party's stay in the village, dances and songs are arranged regularly and the members of the village community, along with their marriage guests, share and enjoy the gay festivity. A special song for the occasion is sung by the people of the bride's side to express humility and gratitude on their part. They sing: 'Before this eventful day (of marriage), we had not known each other. We had never met nor talked (so closely) to each other. The gods above have united us and we start living as one from this day. Your son we regard as our own (son) and entrust our daughter to your charge. We offer this humble food of ours with affection and pleasure, and, though it may not be as rich as the food to which you are accustomed, in all kindness please accept it.'

At the conclusion of the three-day ceremony, the marriage party returns to its home. The girls of the bride's village usually come with the party upto the village-gate to see them off. Before final parting, they dance and joke once again with the boys of the marriage party and paint their faces black. They then bid farewell to the marriage guests and the party marches towards its village.

The bride does not accompany the groom to his home soon after the marriage ceremony. She has to stay back with her parents for about a year more after

the marriage. The husband may, however, visit her during this period at her parents' house. At the end of the year, the husband accompanied by the Mukhou (the go-between) goes to bring her home. The parents and some brothers or relatives of the bride may also come to escort her to her husband's place. There is, however, no need for any special ceremony this time. The bride's people, when they arrive at the groom's house, are treated with honour and given a good reception by the groom's family. The ceremony in their honour, which mainly consists of feasting and dancing, continues for about four days. They may then return to their home, leaving their daughter in her husband's charge. From now, the bride assumes full membership of her husband's family.

Though the traditional custom is for the bride to stay for about a year with her parents after her marriage and before she goes to live with her husband, the usage is now being relaxed and a bride may begin to live with her husband even earlier than the specified time.

IV. MARRIAGE BY CAPTURE

There is a complementary system of marriage among the Akas, which goes by the name of marriage by 'elopement' or marriage by 'capture' in common phraseology. It is taken resort to generally by the young people when they are not sure about their parents' consent to a marriage proposal of their choice or want to avoid the complex preliminaries to marriage that are necessary under the traditional system. A boy, who may be in love with some girl of

his own or some other village, or may have somehow selected a girl for marriage, elopes with her to his parental village without giving any notice of the event or of his intentions to her parents. He may or may not have given any indication of his plan to his parents before he actually elopes with the girl to his home. After reaching the house, he sacrifices a pig and invites the village community to a feast. He tells then what has happened. The local priest ties a thread of sheep-hair, called *fokki*, around the girl's right hand along with the ancestral ornament *aescheri*. This tying of the thread by the priest gives a stamp of marriage and a kind of social recognition to the marital relationship. With the discharge of this elementary social rite, the bride is supposed to have been united in wedlock, and enters her husband's family as a virtual member.

On knowing of the incident and her whereabouts, the parents of the girl come to the groom's house. They meet his parents and, as they find no other way than to agree quietly to the arrangement already arrived at by their daughter and concluded with the performance of the ceremonial wedding rite, they give their consent to the marriage. The only thing within their power now is to put forward their demand of the bride-price to which they are fully entitled even where the marriage might have been consummated without their prior concurrence or without any pre-settlement. A meeting is thus arranged between the parents of the bride and those of the groom. Other people of the village may also join them in the meeting. The primary purpose of such a

conference is to decide upon the amount of bride-price which may be settled after some deliberations. The people of the girl's house then return to their village and she is allowed to stay back with her husband. Obviously, under this system it is not necessary for the bride to go to live with her husband at the completion of a year since she already starts living with him after the elopement. The bride-price may be paid by the groom's parents either immediately or they make some mutual arrangement to pay it later. Usually, no disputes arise over this. It is only the failure to abide by the promised payment of bride-price which may create some trouble. Both parties, however, try their best to avoid such a situation.

The principles of clan-exogamy and preferably village-exogamy are respected in this kind of marriage too, and it is only to the elopements within the social sanctions that the community may give its approval.

The marriage by elopement is considered to be a convenient system and is favoured for this reason by the younger generation. It does not necessitate too many precedents or antecedents to marriage, such as the elaborate negotiations through the mediator, approval by the priest, the fixing and re-fixing of the marriage-date and the condition for the bride to stay with her parents for another year after her marriage before she may start living with her husband. Nor does it involve any complex ritual to ceremonise the marriage. It is largely due to these practical advantages that elopements, though not

considered strictly correct, are often winked at and accepted.

V. INTER-MARRIAGE RELATIONS WITH MIJIS

It has been referred earlier that the Akas have inter-social relations with the Mijis, the people living in their neighbouring areas. The Mijis are the only tribe with whom the Akas have maintained any sort of social communion. This inter-relationship between the two tribes presents some kind of theoretical problem, for a tribe is understood as an essentially endogamous group. And there can be little dispute over the fact that the Akas and the Mijis are two separate tribes. It seems likely that closer geographical residence with at least some of the identical principles of belief in the beginning and later trade-relations might have brought the two communities nearer to each other, and thus webbed them in close social ties. It may be due to these inter-marriages between them that the people of two tribes look much alike in their physical appearance.

There is a legend among the Mijis, recorded by Dr Elwin, which suggests in a way how the Akas and Mijis might have come closer and started inter-marrying :

Formerly, Gunnu, the Aka, and Dhammai, the Miji, were brothers, Dhammai being the elder. Dhammai went towards Lhasa and Gunnu to Assam to tax the people. After a year, when they had brought home their dues, they met and Dhammai asked Gunnu what he had received. Gunnu showed him pieces of silk cloth, supari and cotton yarn. Dhammai

produced sheepskin, salt and cows' tail. He said to his brother, 'You give me some yarn and cloth and I will give you salt and sheepskin'. In this way, trade began between them and, since then, their descendants have intermarried[55].

The inter-tribal relations of Akas and Mijis are not limited to inter-marriage only. The two tribes have been further united by the religious tie as here too, they share common beliefs and practices. Inter-marriage and other social relations between Akas and Mijis have provided a stronger social bond between the two tribes.

VI. CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE

Marriages with one's own cross-cousins are quite popular among the Akas. A cross-cousin is, in fact, regarded as a preferential mate. A boy usually prefers to marry a girl whom he might have known from his early age and a cross-cousin, as such, stands nearer to him, being next to his own blood kindred, than any other girl of his community and outside his own clan group. Such marriages are permitted with all kinds of cross-cousins. A person can marry his mother's brother's daughter ; similarly, a girl can marry her mother's brother's son. Besides, a boy or a girl can also marry his or her mother's sister's daughter or son.

Direct parallel-cousin marriages with one's father's brother's son or daughter are strictly avoided. Since society is organized on patriarchal lines, such

[55] Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* (Shillong, 1958), p. 105.

marriages would only amount to marrying one's own blood-kins and, therefore, incestuous and hence forbidden.

Besides the cross-cousin marriage, there are a few other social usages related with marriage, such as polygamy, levirate and sororate.

VII. POLYGYNY

Polygyny is quite common in Aka society. A man can marry more than one woman at a time. It depends more upon one's economic and social status than on anything else. Along with this, the consent of the first wife is always necessary which, in fact, is not difficult to obtain. The two wives can share the economic burden better than an individual woman. Thus, when a husband opens before his wife the subject of his second marriage, she often welcomes the proposal with good spirits. The wives often live in good harmony and work together in the laborious pursuits of subsistence. This may be even more ensured, if they happen to be sisters among themselves. In such a case, the usages of polygyny and sororate are combined together. There is no distinction made between the children of the two wòmen. Polygyny enhances a man's status in society since it is indicative of his economic stability to provide for more than one wife.

Polyandry is wholly unknown among the Akas.

VIII. LEVIRATE

Levirate is popular in Aka society. A man usually inherits the widow of his elder brother. He, however,

An influential Aka youth with his Miji wife

Bringing firewood from the forest

The Aka village council

cannot inherit the wife of his younger brother. This practice of inheriting the wife of elder brother may be called the senior levirate. It is customary for a widow to start living with her husband's younger brother as his virtual wife. Where both of them do not favour a union, she may be allowed to live with the man of her choice from, of course, among the community members, provided the man agrees to pay the bride-price spent on her marriage to her husband's brother. If the woman wants a separation but her brother-in-law (husband's brother), who holds a legal claim upon her, resists, he may, or she may, refer the dispute to the local village council for settlement. The decision of the council would then become legally binding on both of them.

IX. SORORATE

Another form of marrying one's sisters-in-law, known as sororate, is also prevalent among the people. A man may marry his wife's sisters, either in the former's life-time or after that. The usage of sororate has, like the levirate, a limitation in the sense that one can marry only the younger sisters of his wife, and not the elder ; this may be better called the junior sororate.

Both these usages, the sororate and the levirate, may operate simultaneously, and may sometimes also combine polygyny with them. Under both the usages, a man marries his affinal kins—the sisters-in-law, the basic difference between the two being that, while under one it is a matter of acquisition, under the other it is a case of virtual inheritance.

X. INCEST TABOO

Marriage or any kind of extra-marital relation within the restricted group of one's own kindred is regarded as incest in Aka society. The very idea of incest is repugnant to the Akas. The incest taboo, the violation of which involves heavy penalties, wards off such possibilities. The violations are strictly punishable by the village community. Unlike other social crimes, incest is almost unforgivable. The persons indulging in it may even be killed. Even a reference to sex in the conversation between the prohibited degrees of kinship is considered equally repulsive and both the persons found indulging in such a filthy talk are made a subject of public ridicule. This is supposed to serve as a deterrent for them.

The most important taboo is that which forbids incestuous relations between brother and sister. The incest taboos prevent the breach of the rules of clan-exogamy besides making such marital relations with one's kin almost impossible as they are considered highly against the social norm. The incest taboos, thus, in a way, act as a balance for the social norms and values.

XI. BRIDE-PRICE

Marriage in tribal societies involves an obligation on the part of the bridegroom and his people towards the bride's parents. This obligation he tries to fulfil by making some payment to the parents of the bride. The payment is usually made in kind, in the form of cattle, cloth and utensils. In Aka society, the

bride-price consists of mithun *(bos frontalis)*,[56] iron-made hearth-stands *(aescheperi)*, and cloth. The amount of bride-price to be paid depends upon the social status of the bride's parents. The higher the position enjoyed by her father in society, the greater will be the number of candidates to claim his daughter's hand, and thus larger the amount he can expect as bride-price.

The cloth, given in bride-price, is of two types, a small piece of cloth known by the local name of *emisa* and a large piece of cloth known as *auschagemso*. Besides these, the groom has also to give a piece of cloth to each of the brothers of the bride and this cloth then becomes known as *sador*. All cloth, given in bride-price, is known by the general name of *basa*.

Mithuns are an essential part of the bride-price, with which *aescheperi* and *basa* are also almost invariably associated. Commonly, one or two mithuns, one *aescheperi* and four or five pieces of *basa* are given. A rich man can, however, afford to pay even ten mithuns with two or more hearth-stands and several pieces of cloth. The bride-price is usually required to be paid at the time of marriage but its amount has to be in any case decided well in advance, and on its settlement only, the marriage is supposed to have been finalised. Marriage negotiations are likely to break off, if the two parties cannot reach any agreement with regard to the bride-price. In case, a man is not able to pay the whole amount of bride-price

[56] Commonly known as the Indian bison.

in one instance, he may be permitted to pay a part of it at marriage and the rest afterwards, if the bride's parents agree to the arrangement.

When a man is too poor to raise even the minimum bride-price and yet wants to marry, he may take some sort of service in the house of the bride's parents. He may serve them for about three or four years, and thus earn some amount to raise the necessary bride-price. In return for his service, a part of the bride-price, as originally required, may be condoned by his prospective father-in-law and, with the payment of a small amount only, he may be allowed to marry the girl. He can, however, have anticipatory marital relations with the girl even before marriage and during his period of service. It may also happen that, by the time, he is in a position to raise the bride-price, two or more children are born to him, at which the necessity for a separate household for his family becomes still more urgent. He may thus pay off the bride-price, whatever he can, and separate with his wife and children to find his individual family.

The temporary residence of the husband in his wife's home, necessitated as it is mainly by economic considerations, does not give rise to any matriarchal institutions or usages related with it, nor does it in any way suggest matrilocal residence.

XII. MARRIAGE-GIFTS

Besides the bride-price, which a man has to pay to the bride's parents before he brings home a wife, the bride's parents have also to give some gifts to

their daughter at the time of her marriage. The marriage-gifts, which the bride's parents give, usually consist of the ornaments (which are kept exclusively reserved for the occasion) and some utensils. The silver ornaments, given as gifts, are usually *lenchhi*—the ornament of the forehead, *melu*—the ornament worn over the chest, *geebind*—the ear-rings, and *getzu*—the wristlets. Besides these, the ancestral ornament, *aescheri*, invariably accompanies the marriage-gifts. The utensils, commonly added to such gifts, are the *bela* pots. A kind of dao, known as *wetzchi*, may also be included in the list of marriage-gifts. The marriage-gifts are brought by the bride when she comes to live with her husband. Since these gifts are usually the things of her personal use, she continues to retain her exclusive right over them even in her husband's house.

XIII. KINSHIP SYSTEM

The kinship system which involves a study of the terms of address for kin, both agnatic and affinal, serves as a clue to the understanding of many social usages. The common form of kinship terminology among the Akas is what has been called the classificatory system of kinship. It means that a single term of address is used for a number of relationships, or to say in other words, a particular term of address is extended to a class of relationships instead of a particular relation. Distinguished from this is the descriptive system of kinship which, as the name suggests, is the system of a particular term of address for each relationship.

Nium is the classificatory term of address for younger sister. A person addresses all his cousins and sisters, younger than him in age, as *nium*. The same term is used further by him to address also his nieces who are younger than he. The term *nium* is even further extended to address those girls of the clan who stand younger in age than the subject. This is understandable in the context of the belief of common blood of the members of the clan. Since the members of the same clan are regarded as descendants of a common ancestor, they are virtually the members of what may be called one's extended family. All the girls of the clan thus stand in the relationship of agnatic kin under this belief and are as such prohibited for marriage. Hence the rule of clan exogamy and hence the same term of address for them as for one's own sisters.

The term of address for one's elder sister, *ama*, is similarly extended to all the girls of the clan who stand in elder relation to the speaker. The girl in her turn addresses all the younger members of her opposite sex by the term *nium* besides her own younger brothers. She addresses all her elder brothers, as well as the elder men of her clan, by the common term *aiya*. The terms of address by the subject for one's sisters and brothers are thus synonymous with his or her terms of address for all the members of the clan standing under the particular age and sex groups. These terms of address are essentially classificatory.

Father's elder brother is addressed as *akhi*; the same term is extended to include all those men of

the clan who stand in elder relation to one's father. Father's younger brother is similarly addressed as *alyou*, a classificatory term which is extended to include all those men of the clan who stand younger to one's father. This practice of addressing the kin seems to be related to the patriarchal organization of the Akas.

A person addresses his mother's brother as *as*; it is extended, irrespective of any sex distinction, to his mother's sisters, as well as all other kinswomen of the latter. This seems to be the most extensive form of classificatory system of kinship among the Akas.

The terms of address for certain types of relation, such as for father and mother, are essentially descriptive in nature, which is to say, a particular term of address is used to denote a single and specific relationship. *Ain* is the descriptive term of address for one's own mother and does not imply any other set of relationships. Similarly father is addressed as *au* and the term denotes no other relationship.

The kinship system of the Akas is indicative, to some extent, of their patrilineal usages and the form of society, since the terms of address for the kins of the father's clan are correlative with the terms of address for the members of father's family, keeping in view the particular age and sex groups.

XIV. THE SOCIAL INSTITUTION OF THUMONA

The conceptions of friendship and hospitality are highly developed among the Akas. These are reflected in their traditional institution of *thumona*. The term

thumona means three things among the Akas. Construed in common words, it means a guest, a guest-chamber as well as the institution of visiting one another as guest. The high sense of hospitality which an Aka shows towards his guest is considered to be a part of his tradition. The people seem to be ever willing to pay social visits to their friends and relatives as well as to play a host to the visitors. This hospitality and willingness to be social have taken the shape of an institution which we may call *thumona* or the system of guest-visits.[1] An Aka invites his friend or any other member of his community to accept a *thumona* with him. The invitee, in compliance with his friend's request, visits him where he is accorded a warm welcome and is treated hospitably in the special guest chamber. At the time of his departure after a couple of days' stay with his friend or relative, as the case may be, he is presented with some gifts by the host. These may be a mithun or an ancestral necklace called *richaji* or a few silver ornaments like *lenchhi* and *melu*. *Endi* cloth or an iron hearth-stand—*aescheperi*—is also sometimes given as gift to a guest.

At the time of farewell when the guest is presented with gifts, he also extends an invitation to his friend. And the latter has to accept the social call. In return of the invitation he also pays a social visit to his friend at his convenience. It is necessary that a *thumona* should be returned within

[1] *Alohi* is the Assamese term for a guest and this term is sometimes used as a substitute for *thumona*.

a year. He discusses this with his host whom he had earlier obliged by playing himself a host. It is now the turn of his friend to discharge his obligation equally well ; in fact, in doing so, the latter often wants to surpass his friend by a higher degree of cordiality and enthusiastic hospitality. He also gives some presents to his guest on farewell as a token of *thumona.* It is often the effort of an Aka host to multiply in some way the gifts he had received from his friend and thus exhibit a greater hospitality. The departing guest may again offer an invitation to his host and thus the cycle of *thumona* or mutual visits goes on rotating. In course of time the number of guests to a particular house increases considerably as not only friends and relatives are extended an invitation of *thumona,* but more and more members of the community, who might have so far remained unacquainted, are also tried to be enlisted to *thumona* of a house.

The institution of *thumona* has a special role to play in the social life of the Akas. It brings the people of the community closer to each other, makes them conscious of 'common groupism' and engenders in them a feeling of greater brotherhood. It promotes the reciprocal relations and thus unites the people in the social bond more strongly. These occasions help in a better understanding and appreciation of each other's views. They also provide an opportunity for initiating marriage proposals which might eventually prove fruitful. Much more than anything else, the system of *thumona* keeps the solidarity of the tribe by providing an incentive to the feeling of 'we group.'

XV. SOCIAL DANCES AND SONGS

Dances and songs among the tribal people are the medium of their social recreation. Each tribal society has its ceremonials which are associated with their particular dances and songs, befitting the occasion. The Akas have a number of such dances and songs for the different socio-religious festivities. The dances are performed in different ways and are often accompanied by some song. In some dances the boys join the party of girls and both dance together ; in others, boys and girls dance separately. There are some other dances in which the girls dance and sing by themselves.

One of the well-known dances among the Akas is the *sadinuktso*. A member from the boys' group comes forward, gives his performance for a short while and recedes. A girl then comes forward and she also dances all alone. This rotation of the dance by girls and boys, one after another, goes on till all the boys and girls of the group have danced. The girls dance rather slowly with more sobriety than the boys whose movements in the dance seem to be more rhythmic. The latter move front and back with much agility, dancing in a half-circle and waving their hands up, while the girls dance rather steadily with gentle movements. The dance is accompanied by musical instruments like *sedi* (drum) and *thalmu* (metal plates). No song is sung with this dance. The dance is generally performed on occasions of marriage, entertainment of a guest or in the ceremony following the construction of a new house.

Another common dance associated with the last two ceremonials above is the *chhakou-do*, which literally means 'to ask for more.' When the people have been entertained in a community feast, a group of dancers begin to dance and sing asking for more food and drink. The song accompanying this dance is also called *chhakou-do*. The participants in this dance are usually four or five boys in a group though sometimes the girls may also join the party.

Game played by boys

The most popular song of the Akas is known as the *brjhva,* associated with the dance of the same name. The first line of the song, *Adi-e-da-dida* is repeated off and on. The dance is performed usually at the marriage ceremony or at the feast given at the construction of a new house. It is also sung when the people are on journey from one village to another. The people believe this song to be as old as the origin of man.

Another popular song of the people is the *chifou-chhe* which is usually sung on marriage occasions. Unlike other songs, the singers in this are the older people of the bride's village who express their humility and respect for the guests through the song.[1]

A popular song among the youths is a love-lyric. The lovers are not allowed to meet by their parents. They pine for the meeting and, in a state of agony and frustration, give vent to their feelings through the song. The theme of the song is, 'Where shall I meet my beloved', which is expressed in different ways through all the stanzas of the song. The boy and the girl, both have their parts to play in the song, though the feelings remain the same. Since it is a love-song, the boy and the girl are supposed to sing it individually and secretly behind the bushes in the solitary corners of the jungle. The song is known as the *mukhsa-memsa-lumasu-chhe.*

Besides these main songs and dances, there are a few others, each of them having its significance for a particular occasion.

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[1] See under 'Marriage ceremony.'

XVI. LIFE-CYCLE OF AN INDIVIDUAL

The life-cycle of an individual in a tribal society follows a greater degree of uniformity than is found in sophisticated societies where the individual gets greater opportunity to follow his own way. An individual in Aka society follows more or less the same traditional pattern of life which has come down from his ancestors.

XVII. THE BIRTH

The birth of a child is a matter of rejoicing not only to the family but also to the neighbours, and sometimes to the whole village. During the period of pregnancy, rites are performed to appease the deity so that the sufferings and pain in child-birth may be reduced. Offerings are also made so that a promising child may be born.[1] After the birth of the baby an offering is made to the deity who is in charge of child welfare. The most important ceremony associated with the birth of a child is the binding of the ancestral thread—*fokki*—around the right hand of the child by the *Mugou* (the village priest). Every family has its own ancestral threads which are the first things to be inherited by a child soon after its birth. The relatives of the family and other members of the community usually come to see the child. The village priest is consulted to divine whether the child has any pre-natal relations with the family. Generally a feast is arranged by the father for the whole village commu-

[1] See these ceremonies under chapter on Religion and Magic.

nity to celebrate the birth ; on such an occasion a mithun or several pigs may be sacrificed.

Around the completion of the first year, propitiation of another deity, who from now onwards looks after the child, has to be done to ensure his blessings.

The ear-initiation ceremony for the child, both for boys and girls, takes place at an early age. The ear-lobes of the child are pierced through to put on small bamboo ear-rings, called *fusva.* Later on the boys and the girls replace these small ear-rings by some other ear-rings, called *rembi.* The girls on attaining maturity further replace these small ear-rings by bigger ear-bulbs known as *fuba-limb.*

As the child grows, it gradually learns the traditional games and sports. The boys and girls around the age of five start playing with the children of their own age. But the sportive life of children soon gives way to the call of domestic duties in which they are expected to assist soon after reaching the age of eight or nine. They soon learn their duties under the guidance of the elder members of the house. Boys and girls over the age of ten begin to substantively co-operate in the management of domestic affairs.[1] There is, however, no strict division of work among the boys and girls and their duties may often overlap. Distinction in sex is not much marked by the society until they attain puberty. Both the boys and girls of the community, up to the age of ten or twelve, are known by the name of

[1] See Chapter IV for division of work among the sexes.

angasa. After crossing the above age-line and till they attain adolescence, the boys are called *mukhsa* and the girls *memsa.*

XVIII. ADOLESCENCE

The boys attain adolescence around the age of fifteen. By now they become conscious of their individuality and begin to adapt themselves to the more manly tasks of the community. The girls, on attaining the age of puberty, begin to feel shy and avoid the company of the boys who had hitherto been their playmates.

The age of puberty among girls varies from about fourteen to seventeen. On her first menstruation, a girl completely shuts herself off from the rest of the world around her, partly because of the awakening of shyness in her, and partly due to sociological impositions. Menstruation in women is attributed to a kind of evil influence, which, if not properly guarded against, can lead to disastrous results. During her first menses, therefore, a girl is required to live in a separate hut or apartment specially made for this purpose in every house. She is not allowed to enter the main house nor to come into sight of any adult man. Food is served to her in her own compartment and pots used by her are not to be used by other members of the house. She cannot touch the hearth lest it be defiled ; if she requires it at all to warm herself, it may be provided separately. She has to live a segregated and restrained life during the period. Her only companions at this time are the young children of the family who may casually visit her.

On her subsequent menses, however, it is not necessary for the girl to stay in a separate hut. Nevertheless she has to occupy an isolated corner of the house and is not allowed to participate in the domestic life of the family. Other restrictions upon her too remain as strict as during the first menses. . On the last day of her menstrual period, she washes herself fully before she is allowed to return to her routine of life.

The belief in the evil influence of menstruation deeply pervades Aka thought. It is a strong belief among the people that if a man takes the food prepared by a woman in her monthly period, he will fall down on the ground instantaneously, blood will ooze out from his mouth and nose and he may lose his life. If a man going for hunt, perchance eats food prepared or even touched by her, he may either lose his life then and there or at least lose his power of hunting. A warrior may similarly lose his valour and the priest his power of divination and his charms or even his life. A number of social taboos thus surround a woman during her menstrual period to ward off the evil results.

Adolescence among boys is not marked by any initiation ceremonies, nor do any puberty rites follow in case of girls.

XIX. CONJUGAL LIFE

A man in the Aka society generally marries around the age of twenty. The girls are usually married between the age of fifteen and twenty. Cases of child-marriage are rare. After about a year of marriage,

when his bride comes to live with him, a man founds the conjugal family ; the separation from the parental roof may be effected latest after the birth of a child. Thus he breaks off from the consanguine family after his marriage and with his wife lays the foundations of the individual or conjugal family which goes expanding as the children are born. It however does not ever take the form of a joint family. Instances are rare where brothers choose to live together even after their marriage. Throughout their married life, husband and wife work together in a spirit of co-operation and mutual adjustment which are so necessary to share the economic burden among the hill people.[1]

XX. LATER LIFE

As an individual grows old, his interest towards life gradually wanes. The major part of his work he now entrusts to his grown-up sons. He has also to effect a proper division of property among his sons as and when each of them gets married. Much of his time is occupied henceforth in the social affairs of the village. As age commands more respect in the community, he now finds a better chance to give a form to his individual views than could have been possible ever before. Giving advice in council and guiding the important socio-religious operations become the main part of his routine till he dies.

[1] See Chapter IV.

XXI. AFTER-LIFE

The Akas practise burial. The body is carried to the grave and the *Mugou* performs the mortuary rites on the first as well as the last day of mourning. The ceremonial mourning lasts for ten days. The whole community participates in the mortuary ceremonial. All socio-religious observances remain at a standstill for the family during the period of mourning.

The Akas have a belief in the life here-after. The soul, according to the Aka belief, after leaving the body goes to dwell in a place known as *jana*. All souls, good or bad, have to pass through this *jana* from where they are sorted out by the deities according to their merits or demerits during their life. The *Mugou* raises his prayers to the gods so that they may bless the soul to rest in peace, otherwise it wanders and troubles the people. As the Akas believe in the transmigration of the soul, the *Mugou* also makes his prayers to let the soul take birth again in the same family.

Throughout his life an individual remains an active member of his society. He co-operates with his family and his community in all their economic, social and religious enterprises. Though the unit for many of these remains the individual family, all such activities conclude with a communal gathering which is secured through the community feast, which invariably accompanies all individual as well as communal undertakings. The status and prestige of the individual are largely determined by his social behaviour. It is thus as an interested member in the

wider sphere of social life that an individual can hope to be remembered most in his community.

The social machinery of the Akas thus functions with the co-ordination of the members of the village community, who by their regard for the values of their society have not only helped the tribe to maintain the tribal solidarity but have also in a way helped the tribe to retain its distinctive existence.

CHAPTER SIX

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The political organization of a tribal community is the traditional way in which the society recognizes the exercise of authority. This authority may be vested in a single individual acting as the headman of the village, or it may be entrusted to a few chosen representatives of the village forming a council of elders —as among the Adi groups—and acting on behalf of the whole village community whose confidence they may command, or in the third alternative, the village community may keep the authority to itself. While the first seems to be an autocratic set-up, the latter two are more popular among those societies where the democratic ideas have a special value. The political organization of the Akas belongs to the third and the last type. The unit of political organization in Aka society is the village community as a whole acting in the form of a 'village council'.

I. THE VILLAGE COUNCIL

The village council or *melley*, more commonly known by the Assamese word *Raiz* among the Akas, consists of the *Gaon Burah* (the chief of the village), his two juniors, the *Borah* and the *Gibba*, and the members of the village community. It is a convention for all the members of the village to participate in the meetings of the council, particularly when some important subject has to be discussed. In practice,

however, many of the proceedings of such meetings concern only a few of the members present—those who have a knowledge of the subject under consideration or those who are well-versed with the intricacies of the tribal law. Thus the experts play their part while others only sit and listen. However, resort to their votes has to be taken whenever a decision is made. In matters of judgment, in fact, it is the consent of the village community in its corporate capacity that largely counts.

The persons of importance in the village council are the *Gaon Burah*, the *Borah*, and the *Gibba*, who command an influence in their village by virtue of their position. Besides them, the elder people of the community have also a say in the matter. Respect is usually given to age. The Akas regard youths as immature ; 'they have yet to have the experience of life,' 'they are often short-tempered since their blood is hot.' They believe that the handling of the important affairs of the village requires not an intemperate but a cool and experienced head which is often associated with grey hair. Importance is thus attached not so much to wealth or property as to age. Importance is also given to rank since the community recognizes these vested interests.

There is no fixed place for holding the meetings of the village council. Generally they prefer to meet in the open ground. In Jamiri village, there is a village-platform in front of the Rani's house where the meetings of the local council are held. A few stones are laid there to serve the purpose of seats for the village members ; a few benches of bamboo have

also been fixed on the ground by the side of stone seats. The platform is considered to be a piece of antiquity and is, as such, regarded sacred ; the people believe that they, as well as their ancestors, have held numberless meetings and taken dccisions on many important issues on this platform. The seats of stone too are regarded sacred and any attempt to unearth or to displace them would naturally hurt the sentiment of the people since it would mean a definite 'bad omen' to them.

The village council or the *Raiz* is the supreme administrative agency of the village. Its jurisdiction, as such, is very large. It extends from ordinary house-to-house disputes to inter-village conflicts. The cases of theft (which are in fact rare), quarrel or fight, elopement and adultery, murder and vengeance as well as sorcery or witchcraft all fall within its province.

II. CUSTOMARY LAW

The laws followed by the *melley* (the village council) are largely based on customs and conventions. In a case of theft, a meeting of the village council is convened when it receives a report to this effect. The council then calls an explanation from the suspect. If he admits the charge, yet asserts the righteousness of his act (which is not uncommon in such cases), saying that he had to commit the offence in retaliation or reparation of some earlier injury caused to him by the person concerned, the village council finds itself indeed in a fix. It has then to weigh both the issues in the light of circumstantial evidence before giving its final verdict. Where the culprit

admits the fault but fails to assign any sound reason for its commitment, he has to pay some compensation to the person whom he may have caused harm or discomfort. If he fails to do so, he may be left at the mercy of the person to whom he stands a culprit. He may also be required to take a pledge before the council for not committing the act in future.

If a married woman elopes with some man and if her husband lodges a formal complaint before the village community, a meeting of the council has to be summoned. The lover is called upon to pay the amount of bride-price incurred on her marriage to her husband, along with some additional amount in the form of penalty, if he wants to keep her. Where he readily does so, the woman may be allowed to stay with him. But if he fails to abide by the arrangement made by the council, he has to restore her to her husband. The woman is also then forced to live with her husband since her lover has proved himself incapable of bearing the economic obligation for her.

Where a woman runs away with a man of some other village, though of her own community, over which the local administrators of the village community have no legal control, an intermediary has to be sent immediately to the village, in the first instance, to formally demand her back, or in the alternative, to recover the bride-price from her lover as demanded by her husband. If none of these demands are met with, the village council may decide upon some stern action, even to the extent of raiding the

village of her shelter in order to bring her back by force and to punish her lover. Such village raids were rather a thing of common occurrence till the recent past, and often resulted in blood-feuds. They are now avoided as far as possible. With the coming of the present Administration, and with the establishment of proper law and order in these areas, such internecine wars have now ceased. The people have been able to realise the ill-effects of such vendettas. Cases of extra-marital relations and adultery are also strictly punishable by the village council.

III. PRINCIPLES OF JUSTICE

Dispensation of justice to all is the primary concern of the administrative machinery of the Akas. Murder being a highly anti-social act arouses strong sentiment of anger towards the murderer and pity towards the victim; it leads to an attitude of antipathy on the part of the community towards the criminal. 'No one has a right to take the life of any person unless it may be inevitable in some way,' is the common maxim and the basic principle of justice known to the Aka people. This may mean more or less that to take one's life is permissible only under the canons of justice. This principle is complemented by a second one which requires that 'no one inciting or responsible for such a heinous crime would go unpunished'.

Cases of murder, which generally warrant capital punishment, are weighed on these two maxims. In the meantime, full opportunity is given to the culprit

to argue his case and convince the members of the council, if possible, either of his innocence in the matter or of the justification of his act. The justification of the offence is usually sought to be established by accounting some previous offence caused to the criminal, in retribution of which only he had to resort to the criminal act on his part. If the criminal succeeds in convincing the council in his favour, no punishment may be meted out to him.

Even when the indictment against an assassin is established on evidence, he may be required, *at worst*, to pay some penalty to the victim's family who has sustained a loss by his action. The amount of penalty that may be imposed, as such, varies according to the rank and status of the victim. If he happens to be a man of prominence in his community whose loss may not be a loss only to his family but a loss to the society as well, the price that may be demanded in reparation of the crime is nothing less than fifteen or twenty mithuns. Besides this penalty, the culprit has also to give a feast to the whole village community, to soothe the antagonism between the two parties in dispute.

If the culprit fails to pay the penalty demanded, or if he is intransigent, he may be handed over to the family of the victim which may then keep him as a captive till he agrees to pay the penalty. His life may then naturally be in the hands of his victim's people. This is supposed to be the practicable method to ensure proper retribution and to guarantee full justice under such circumstances. Normally, the loss of a person is always considered to be

compensated by remunerative penalties. To the Aka mind, probably, there seems to be no such crime as may not admit of some compensation or the other. Capital punishment, though not wholly unknown to the Akas, is enforced only in the last resort.

IV. THE ORDEAL

The ordeal among the Akas is a subsidiary method of administering justice. It is resorted to only where other primary agencies of law and justice fail to produce results. To the Akas the most common way of practising the ordeal is to ask the suspect to put his hands into boiling water. This happens usually in cases of murder or practice of black magic, where the charge against the suspect seems to be almost established by evidence but where he still pretends innocence.

Where a case of suspected black magic is brought to the notice of the village council, and where the suspect denies the charge, it may arrange an ordeal to decide the case. As soon as such an ordeal appears to be inevitable, the village council calls for the chief priest or *Mugou* to conduct it. The *Mugou* performs some ceremonial rites and prays to the gods to award full justice to the sufferers and to punish the sorcerer heavily if he has practised sorcery.

Water is boiled in a vessel with the head of a snake or a piece of skin of tiger or panther in it. The *Mugou* in the midst of religious rites addresses the head of the snake with the words: 'Ye ! as thou bitest the human beings guilty of some

act, cast thine sting to this man if he has really committed the offence.' If instead of the snake's head, a piece of tiger's skin has been procured as the instrument of ordeal, the *Mugou* may speak to it thus : 'As thou killest the human beings and the animals, kill this man by the power in you (in course of this ordeal) if he is guilty of the charge.' The culprit is then asked to put his hands into the boiling water which might have been poisoned in either of the above ways. At such an occasion the whole village may gather there to watch the ordeal, but it is the *Mugou* there who is most attentively engaged in reading the minutest details of the ordeal. If the culprit can bring himself out of the ordeal triumphantly, without injury to his hands, which may perhaps happen only by some miracle coming to his rescue, he proves himself 'innocent' of the crime with which he is charged and is set free from the clutches of tribal law. No further reasoning can then challenge or disprove it. If, however, on the other hand, burns appear on his hand, he is supposed to have succumbed to the ordeal and thus is proved guilty of the charge beyond doubt. He then falls within the province of tribal law and has to await his lot there. He is required to abide by the decision of the council which may require him to pay some adequate compensation to the sufferer. But in either case, he has to give a feast to the village community. The attempt of the ordeal is always to make adequate reparation for the loss inflicted by sorcery. It is to ensure this that the ordeal invariably demands the presence of a learned priest who alone is considered

capable to conduct it in the right way and interpret the results properly.

All these methods of administering justice point towards a well-defined system of law and order and the agencies which enforce it in the Aka society. The punishment given may be 'retributive' or 'corrigent' but in either case it always aims at ensuring justice to all and keeping perfect order in society.

V. INTER-VILLAGE MEETINGS

Apart from the meetings of the village council which have to deal with only the local affairs, meetings of the representatives from all the neighbouring Aka villages are also convened periodically. They usually meet every sixth or seventh year, but in cases of emergency they can be summoned as necessary. A number of things affecting the Aka villages in common, or the general policy to ensure peace and harmony between the different villages, are on the general agenda of such meetings. The decisions taken in the meeting in common agreement of the representatives, become consequently binding upon their villages. The purpose of such inter-village councils is, in main, to promote cordiality and goodwill among the neighbouring villages.

VI. THE CHIEF OF THE VILLAGE

Along with the main administrative unit of the village, the village council, the chief of the village has also an important role to play in the administrative organization of the village.

The chief of the village is commonly known as *Gaon Burah*,[1] though the local term for him in the Aka language is '*Nuggou*' which literally means 'big man'. He represents, on the one hand, the village community and on the other, acts on behalf of the Administration. The selection to the post of *Gaon Burah* is made by the people of the village themselves and the local administrative authority recognizes it by conferment of Red Coat to the person. He bears it as the insignia of the post. The office of *Gaon Burah* is not hereditary.

The *Gaon Burah* is, generally, the most popular, competent and influential person of the village community who commands full confidence of the village members. He is also one well-versed in the tribal law. The honour of the post also implies great responsibilities. He has to be responsible to the Administration for keeping perfect order in his village and to his people for presenting their demands before the Administrative authority as well as for working for their benefit. He has to get co-operation from his people and make them understand where their interests lie.

The *Gaon Burah* has also to act in co-ordination with the local village council, giving at times his advice and at times exercising his discretion. One who finds himself capable of shouldering such responsibilities alone may aspire for the Red Coat. For honest discharge of his duties he gets the highest respect from his society and honour from the Administration.

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[1] The term, coming from Assamese, is in quite popular usage.

In the discharge of his duties, the *Gaon Burah* is assisted by his two subordinates, the *Borah* and the *Gibba*, who are chosen from among the influential persons of the village. The *Borah* stands next to *Gaon Burah* in authority over the village and is responsible for reporting all local activities and disputes to the latter. He also officiates on behalf of the *Gaon Burah* during the latter's absence from the village. The *Gibba* keeps a watch over the people, their activities and movements as well as character and informs the *Gaon Burah* where necessary.

The *Gaon Burah* also presides over the meetings of the local village council. Though theoretically his powers may be limited in nature, in practice he can always act on his own initiative as well as influence the proceedings of the council. The decision of the *Gaon Burah*, supported by the verdict of the village council, becomes the final word in the local law. Any villager found failing to abide by it is first tried to be persuaded by advice and scorn, but if he fails to respond to such persuasions he may even be expelled from the village for his defiance of authority.

In whatever position the *Gaon Burah* may act, he remains a part and parcel of his village community and his interests remain identical with the interests of his society. He, in fact, only co-operates with the administrative organization of the village, taking himself a lead.

RELIGION AND MAGIC

RELIGION

Religion is commonly understood as the bélief that mankind has in some unseen controlling powers with a related emotion and a sense of morality. In a tribal community like the Aka, these powers invariably increase in number and cast an overall influence over the life and destiny of an individual, or sometimes of the community in general. These forces are supernatural and it is the benevolent or malevolent attitude of one or the other of them that determines happiness and prosperity or misery and destitution in the life of an individual.

In the Aka society there is an hierarchy of gods, deities and spirits who rule over mankind. Each of the deities is responsible for a particular phase of human endeavour in the total mass of activities. Some of them are benevolent while others are essentially malevolent in nature. These deities are in turn controlled by the higher gods who reign above them and are the supreme masters of both the human and unseen worlds. The deities have a command over spirits and human beings as well as over the animal life in general. The spirits also cast an influence—often evil in nature—upon the human life.

The higher gods are identified with the four major forces of nature, the Sky, the Mountain, the Earth

and the Water. The gods and the deities have to be kept appeased for a peaceful living. The propitiations are made by way of rituals which are performed from time to time. Prayers are uttered and sacrifices offered by the local priests to each of these powers. If these are neglected, their wrath may be aroused and cause some catastrophe. Every effort has thus to be made to secure the blessings of the supernatural powers.

I. THE DEITIES

The deities are the supernatural powers commonly worshipped and supplicated to for worldly things. A reference to the higher gods can only be made in times of crisis or as an appeal against the deities. The deities, since they guide most of the phases of human activity, are supposed to be nearer to men.

Supreme among the Aka deities is *Tcharo*. He is the benign ruler of the human as well as the animal kingdom. He looks after the welfare of human beings and protects their cattle. To ensure his blessings, he is appeased by way of sacrifices from time to time. If such propitiations do not follow in time the slightest neglect may result in peril to humanity. The propitiation of the deity is made at least once a year when sacrifices are offered along with prayers. There is no particular time for the ritual though it generally falls in the local month of *Kirihubay* which corresponds roughly to English months of April-May. As the ritual involves the suspension of all outside activities for a definite period, it is per-

Aka girls dancing

A mixed Aka dance

formed preferably after the clearings for Jhuming have been made.

The religious ceremony for the appeasement of *Tcharo* continues from about two to ten days. The duration of the ceremony normally depends upon the kind of sacrifice to follow. The ceremony, at the end of which a mithun is to be sacrificed, lasts for about ten days, while that which is to end with the sacrifice of a pig may be finished within a week. Fowls are sacrificed usually in addition to the main sacrifice. Where fowls are the main as well as the supplementary sacrifice, the ritual does not last more than two or three days.

The conductor of the ritual is the *Mugou*. During the period the ritual is on, he raises his prayers to the deity to bless the performer of the ceremony[1] with a happy fortune, make his crop plentiful and protect his cattle. He also recounts at this time the legend of the human origin: how man was born first in the world and how the various powers over him still control his destiny here. He tries to impress upon the people how the crops may fail and unforeseen calamities fall upon them if *Tcharo* is enraged even for a moment.

On the last day of the ritual the offering is made to the deity. A mithun (*bos frontalis*) or a pig is sacrificed along with several fowls. Before making this sacrifice the *Mugou* speaks a few words telling that the human beings as well as the animals are the

[1]The performer of the ceremony here means the 'person on whose behalf the priest performs the ritual.'

creations and subjects of the same god ruling over them, but as the deities and gods demand an offering from them, animals have to be sacrificed for the gods. He emphasizes how the offering is necessary so that the gods may not be aroused to wrath and inflict their supernatural punishment upon the people, but may instead bless them as well as their crops. All the villagers are invited to a community feast after the offering.

After the ritual is over and the village people have left for their homes, the members of the household performing the ritual begin to observe some taboos. The first taboo shuts them indoors for a few days. They cannot come out of the house as long as the taboo remains in operation and thus careful arrangements have to made to store sufficient food and water before the taboo starts. All outdoor activities, those concerned with field as well as those related to the social side, have to be suspended during the period of taboo. The duration of the taboo may vary from a week to about a fortnight, again depending upon the kind of related sacrifice. The main taboo may be over within a fortnight ; several other taboos, however, remain in operation for some time more. The members can now come out to bring water and firewood but they still cannot enter into any social communion. Another taboo prohibits the cutting of wild plantain trees for about a month or so from the day of the ritual.

In about a month's time other restrictions are also relaxed. It, however, remains a taboo for them to accept a drink outside their house or to accept

any social invitation from the people of the village as well as from outside, and have to remain within the bounds of their village for about three or four months. If the urgency of situation at all makes their movement to some village necessary during the taboo-period, they have to carry their own food supplies as it is a taboo for them to accept food from others. This taboo is the longest and the most rigid and keeps restrained all their social relations for the time.

The cessation of the taboo is celebrated in a special way. The *Mugou* is called to sacrifice a pig and thus ceremonise the withdrawal of the taboo. He once again invokes the blessings of the deity by offering him prayers. With the completion of this supplementary rite, the taboo is supposed to be over and the people may return to their normal life.

After the propitiation to the deity has been made, the people attentively wait to watch for the consequences. If everything goes on well in the village, the people do not fall prey to diseases, their children make a steady progress, the cattle increase in number and the crops are favourable, it is believed that *Tcharo* has accepted the offering and is pleased. But if the things take just the other shape, a feeling of fear mingled with doubt begins to occupy them. To propitiate him further and thus to secure his blessings the ritual may have to be repeated even before the year-end. Under the normal circumstances, however, such a ritual is not frequent.

Another important deity, esteemed high in the order, is known as *Aphinchi.* He is the power

behind the birth of a child. It is he who selects a particular type of baby to take birth in a particular house. He may send a healthy, smart and promising baby or a dull and infirm child. To ensure the birth of a promising child, which all parents normally desire, *Aphinchi* has to be propitiated by way of prayers and offerings during the period of pregnancy. The *Mugou* conducts the ritual and sacrifices pigs and fowls for the offering. Another offering to the deity is made four or five days after the birth of the child, more particularly so if the child born has come up to their expectations. In such a case it is generally believed that the deity has heeded to their prayers. This seems more like a kind of thanksgiving ceremony.

As soon as the child is born the control of *Aphinchi* over it ceases and its further interests pass into the hands of another deity, known by the name of *Chamrom*. It is he who now onwards takes care of the child and continues to look after it throughout its life. The propitiations of *Aphinchi* thus no longer become necessary after the child-birth. It is then *Chamrom* who has to be appeased hereafter from time to time. The destiny of the child in the world and all success to come his way in future lie in the hands of this deity.

The first propitiation of *Chamrom* is usually made around the first birthday of the child. The offering with prayers and sacrifices of pigs and fowls has to be made to the deity by the *Mugou*. If the child takes a normal course of progress, such offerings may be necessary only after every fourth or fifth year. But if the child shows signs of infirm

health, or is otherwise too weak, it may even be necessary to invoke the blessings of the deity every year. The two deities associated with a child's destiny have different functions—one casts his lot in the world, the other guides his destiny there.

Apart from the deities who are responsible for human destiny, there are others who look after the well-being of domesticated cattle and some of the wild animals. The deity looking after the cattle-wealth of the people is called *Jinte-Pinte-Murje.* He keeps the cattle healthy and wards off various diseases. His wrath may cause various epidemics of cattle which, once spread, take a heavy toll of cattle life. Hence to keep him appeased, sacrifices have to be made every third or fourth year, or as may become necessary. If any crisis arises during the intervening period, it may easily be attributed to the wrath of the deity and efforts are made to appease him by necessary ritual. There is no taboo related with this ritual for the men and the women ; the cattle of the house for whom the ritual has been performed, however, remain under taboo for a definite period. They cannot be sold or exchanged in any way during the period of taboo which may last for four to five months. The end of the taboo is marked by a secondary sacrifice of fowls.

The deity who reigns over the wild life of the forest and protects them is known as *Pamle-gri.* His malignance over man is supposed to be cast in an indirect way. If a person loses his life all of a sudden, without illness or accident, it is generally believed that *Pamle-gri* has been provoked by some unbecom-

ing act of his. In such a case sacrifices and prayers have to be offered in the usual way.

Another deity who specially protects the porcupine is known as *Depukiri.* Similarly the deity protecting the fish in water is called *Hukir.* These deities are, in fact, not directly associated with human activities but when their wrath is aroused they send their punishment in the shape of diseases of various kinds. Curiously enough, the symptoms of diseases caused by these two deities are so alike that it often becomes difficult to ascertain in a particular case, which of the two deities is actually enraged. Most diseases are attributed to different supernatural powers, the specific symptoms of a disease indicating the power which may have caused it. But where the symptoms of several diseases overlap, it becomes rather difficult to judge which of the deities is actually responsible for the particular trouble. After the diagnosis is made in consultation with the *Mugou,* the remedy is sought more in the appeasement of the deity than in the treatment of the sufferer. The best diagnostician is the village priest and the best remedy is the offering to the deity.

The offering to *Pamle-gri* has a special feature in as much as it necessitates the sacrifice of a cow and neither a mithun nor a pig can be an adequate substitute for it as may be in ritualistic sacrifices to other deities. Similarly the offerings to *Depukiri* and *Hukir* necessarily involve the sacrifice of a goat and a pig respectively. Fowls are sacrificed without reservation in addition to the main sacrifice for all the deities.

Agricultural activity is controlled and guided by a deity called *Wee-Oesche*, the supreme ruler of agriculture. He controls the harvest from the sowing of seed to the reaping of crop and protects it from the ravages of wild animals and agricultural pests as well as against the natural calamities. The first concern of an agriculturist is thus to appease the deity fully, for on his benignity alone depends the prosperity of the farmer for the year. *Wee-Oesche* is supposed to be a benevolent deity but if the propitiations do not follow in time he is likely to transform his benignant powers into malignant ones.

The propitiation of *Wee-Oesche* is made in the field after the clearing has been finished. Usually a day before the sowing of seed, pigs and fowls are sacrificed and prayers raised by the *Mugou* on behalf of the performer of the ritual. It is necessary that the pig to be sacrificed for this ritual should be of a mixed colour of black and white and never of any one colour.

As soon as the ritual is over, the taboos are brought into operation. No person other than the performer of the ritual is allowed to enter or to pass through the field for about a fortnight from the date of the ceremony. It is a strict taboo for a woman in her menses to visit the field, nor should she pass even by its side. This taboo is observed for a period of about three months. The cessation of the taboo is ceremonised by a secondary sacrifice of fowls. The second offering is necessary lest the crops grown in the field may not be taken by other people of the village. Though cultiva-

tion may be practised every year, the propitiation of *Wee-Oesche* may be made only after every two or three years. It is only in cases of emergency, such as the failure of crop or some other natural calamity, which may lead the people to believe that the deity has been enraged and needs an offering that the ritual may be repeated consecutively for two or three years.

Apart from the above deities responsible for the particular phases of human life or the protection of animals, there is a deity who, when propitiated rightly, blesses people with material success in life. He is known as *Humisise-Jumiriri.* Those who aspire for some material thing or those who wish to overcome their shortcomings invoke his blessings. A *Mugou* who has been vested with priestly powers and finds himself at a loss to execute them properly, or a person who wants to speak impressively before the village council and finds that his memory fails him just at the right moment, may perform the ritual for the propitiation of *Humisise-Jumiriri.* The whole ritual lasts for several days and is concluded with the sacrifice of pigs and fowls. There is no fixed period to celebrate the ritual and its performance depends much upon the subjective need of a person, if and when he has any material end in view.

This ritual is also followed by successive taboos. The first of these suspends, as in all other cases, all movements outside the house for a period of about a week. The members of the family, except the person for whom the ritual has been meant,

return to their normal routine after this period. The aspirant has, however, to live a restrained life for some time more. He should not speak with any priest other than the one who has conducted the ritual nor with any person who may have some special power. This restraint lasts for about a month or two, after which the aspirant may be allowed to return to his routine. If conducted properly, the ritual is supposed to bless the aspirant with the desired end.

Besides these main deities, there are several other less important ones, each of them being associated with a particular disease. When angry they cause these diseases. Thus there is a deity known as *Thamu* who causes bleeding and all other diseases accompanied by bleeding, *Chholemus* is responsible for the diseases of heart and abdomen, *Nams* causes the psychotic diseases connected with greed and lust. They have to be appeased whenever any of them strikes a member of the family or when any such danger is apprehended. The rituals performed for appeasement and the taboos accompanying them are the same as in case of other deities.

II. THE HIGHER GODS

Over and above the deities there is a kingdom of gods who reign not only over men but control the deities and the spirits as well as natural phenomena. It is these high gods who command the greatest awe and reverence. The appeals against the highhandedness of deities, if any, have to be lodged before these higher gods. They are the four

gods and goddesses identified with the four major forces of nature. There is, thus, the God of the Sky, the God of the Mountain, the Goddesss of the Earth and the Goddess of the River.

The God of the Sky is known as *Netz Au*.[1] He reigns above and guides all human activities. *Phu Au*,[2] the symbol of natural prowess, is the Mountain God. The Earth and the River are the mother goddesses, *No Ain*[3] being the Goddess of the Earth and *Hu Ain*[4] the Goddess of the River. Each of these gods and goddesses has a qualifying term of address of 'father' and 'mother' respectively.

The forces of nature cast a supreme influence over the life and thought of the people. The natural phenomena, supernatural as they appear to the people, deeply pervade the religious thought. These natural powers, when appeased in the right way, bless the humanity with happiness, peace and prosperity, but when aroused to wrath, inflict punishment in the form of natural calamities which ultimately mean misery and disaster. The higher gods and goddesses are supposed to be capable of both, the benignant as well as the malignant powers.

To remain satisfied, these natural powers need offerings, like the deities, from time to time. However, unlike the deities, the higher gods and goddesses do not call for separate offerings. The offerings to the four supernatural powers can be made in a joint religious ceremony. There is no fixed period

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[1] *Netz*—Sky, *Au*—Father.
[2] *Phu*—Mountain, *Au*—Father.
[3] *No*—Earth, *Ain*—Mother.
[4] *Hu*—Water, *Ain*—Mother.

for the celebration of the ritual. It has to be performed once in a year and usually in the same month in which it was performed last. It may thus take place any time between the clearing of forest and the sowing of seed. At times of crisis when the people may feel, on the basis of their experience that the gods have been enraged, and since they often attribute this wrath to some wrong on their own part, they may repeat the offerings even more than once a year. The whole ritual may continue for ten to twelve days. The prayers are offered to protect their children, the cattle and the crops and to bless the tribesmen with peaceful and contented living. Through these prayers an appeal is also made to the higher gods to keep an eye on the deities so that they may not cast undue malignance over the people. The offerings are made on the last day of the ceremonial, in support of the prayers, so that they may be heeded earnestly and bear the desired results.

Since the ritual for the higher gods is an important affair, it always calls for the presence of the chief *Mugou,* for, an ordinary *Mugou* is not supposed to be endowed with such priestly powers as may be required to handle the greater religious ceremonial. Usually a mithun, several pigs and a dozen or two of fowls are sacrificed for the occasion.

Immediately after the ritual, a taboo suspends all outside activities for a period of about ten days. The people of the house are not allowed to come out as long as this taboo remains in operation. They get relieved of the taboo by a secondary small

ceremonial involving the offering of pigs. Unlike the main ritual, it may not be necessary to invite all the villagers to the feast. Only the *Mugou* and a few relatives may be all the invitees this time. While other members may be relieved from the restraint after this, the head of the family has to remain under the taboo for about a fortnight.

Aside the four gods and goddesses who reign in the universe, there is a fifth god whose kingdom is under the earth. He is the god *Sikchi.* All human habitation and vegetation are above him. Even the slightest disturbance on his part may result in unforeseen calamities. He has therefore to be kept perfectly appeased.

The propitiation for *Sikchi* usually follows in the rainy season, somewhere around the month of June or July. The ritual may continue for about ten days and is concluded with an offering to the god on the last day. It involves the sacrifice of a mithun or a cow and several pigs and fowls. The *Mugou,* who conducts the ritual, should not be of any ordinary rank ; he should be the chief priest of the village. The taboo which succeeds the ritual is, in broad, the same as in other rituals, requiring the suspension of work for about ten days.

A god-couple essentially looks after the welfare of the womenfolk. They are the god *Brango* and the goddess *Sikchi-Isinsa ;* since they dwell together they are addressed jointly as *Brango-Sikchi-Isinsa.* They are appeased in order to keep the women of the house safe and free from various diseases and to ensure the trouble-free delivery during the child-

birth. Their wrath may cause feminal disorders, hence the necessity of their appeasement from time to time.

The offering to *Brango-Sikchi-Isinsa* is made in a ritual which may last for about a week and end with the sacrifice of pigs and fowls. The sacrifice associated with this ritual has a special feature in it in the sense that it requires as an essential condition that swines and fowls, both, should be of the female sex.

The taboo for total suspension of work on the part of the members of the house follows the ritual and remains in force for three or four days. The women for whom the ritual is meant, however, remain under taboo for about a week. The suspension of taboo is not ceremonised by any secondary offering as is necessary in case of other rituals and only the oral declaration by the *Mugou* may suffice to allow the people to return to their normal life.

III. THE SPIRITS

The last in the hierarchical order of the venerated powers are the spirits of the departed souls, particularly those that are supposed to have left the world in a state of material attachment, or with some unfulfilled or suppressed craving. For these reasons they still want to cling to the world and are thus a source of trouble to the people. They incite fear which, in turn, leads to an attitude of reverence on the part of the people. In all worship of the spirits the underlying feeling is that of awe. The spirits are known as *Chigje*.

Whenever it is felt that a *Chigje* is causing some trouble to the house, the priest is called for counsel and to raise prayers to the spirit to withdraw its evil influence and thus save the people from imperilment. The ritual for the spirit may continue for about eight or ten days and end with an offering of pigs and fowls. If the fury of *Chigje* still remains unabated, even a mithun might be needed for the sacrifice. The usual taboo which warrants the suspension of work immediately follows the ritual.

The belief in a vital soul-substance and in its power to cast an evil influence over mankind points towards the basic religious thought of the Akas. The soul-substance, like the deities, is under the control of the higher gods identified with the natural forces. Their belief in always attributing the supreme power to the four main forces of nature and identifying them with the particular gods and goddesses are the essential features of their religion. It may, however, be presumptuous to classify the religion of the Akas in any way.

IV. THE ROLE AND PLACE OF THE PRIEST

The socio-religious complex of the Akas involves the presence of a priest. Every Aka village has, at least, one priest though many of the big villages have both a chief and an ordinary priest. The priest of the village community, or the *Mugou*, is a member of Aka society. He is selected for the post not because of his hereditary status, nor because of any other consideration, but on account of some special qualities believed to be inherent in him and which

are supposed to enable him to discharge the delicate ritualistic duties. He is the man consulted on all important occasions, private or communal, social or religious. He is consulted whenever a negotiation for marriage is initiated from any side, and if he declares the omen to be bad, few would dare to proceed further in the negotiation. Whenever a baby is born, it is the *Mugou* who is consulted to tell the people of the house whether the child has any pre-natal affiliations with the family. His reading of the issue may confirm or dispel their conjecture. It is, however, not a matter of his personal opinion. It is dependent upon the divination which the *Mugou* is supposed to obtain through his special knowledge and extra-ordinary priestly powers. Similarly, whenever the people arrange a community feast to celebrate a marriage in the house, the division of a family, or the building of a new house, the *Mugou* is invariably the first invitee. No ritual can be performed without the presence of a capable *Mugou*. The *Mugou* is the medium between the people and their gods, deities and spirits. Due to his vast social and religious duties, the *Mugou* is indispensable for the village community.

All *Mugous* are not equal in their status and powers. There are the chief *Mugous* who alone are capable of conducting the important rituals while the ordinary *Mugous* are good for only the simple religious and social ceremonials. The *Mugous* of ordinary rank are not considered capable of conducting the rites connected with the sacrifices of mithun or cow for which a chief *Mugou* has to be invariably sum-

moned. If he may not be readily available in the local village, he has to be called from the nearest village. The ordinary *Mugou* may sacrifice only pigs and fowls and conduct all those rituals associated with such sacrifices. The distinction of their priestly capacity seems to be based more on the degree of knowledge than on anything else.

The village priest can also come from the Miji society, with whom Akas have close social communion. The *Mugou* of Dijungania, an important Aka village, who combines in him the office of the second *Gaon Burah,* is himself a Miji. This not only confirms the fact that the Akas have close social and religious ties with the Miji people, but also shows that if a person has sufficient capacity he can hold more than one office in his village community and that the political and religious offices can be combined in one man.

The religious observances do not have to be carried out on a communal basis ; they are performed mainly on an individual level, each house performing the ritual for its own benefit. The village community is, however, always invited, as in case of social ceremonies, to all community feasts following the religious ceremonials.

The religious life of the Akas is thus interwoven around the ritual-complex which is based on the fundamential desire to appease the supernatural powers controlling the destiny of man.

MAGIC

Magic is generally interpreted as 'the ability to produce marvellous results or miracles with the

aid of spirits or some supernatural agencies'. There are various ways to practise magic ; among most of the tribal communities the imitative magic is common. Imitative or homeopathic magic is based on the hypothesis that 'like would produce the like'. A magician who wants to perform this kind of magic gets hold of some article or belonging of the person on whom he wants to direct his magic. He tries to identify the article with the person and practises his sorcery over it under the belief that the result which he is trying to produce on the object, would have a corresponding effect on the person to whom it belongs. Thus an Aka magician would search for hair, teeth or some cloth of his enemy as an instrument of his magic. If he fails to procure any of these articles, he may perform his magic on the footprints of the person. Though the principle throughout remains fundamentally the same, the magical practices assume different forms.

The popular method of magic among the Akas is called *Shizou.* A man who has a quarrel with some person, and is overwhelmed with a feeling of revenge and if he is a little versed in magical knowledge, may take resort to this form of magic. He may slaughter a dog and take out its blood. He may then wait for the opportunity when he may sprinkle the blood upon his enemy without being detected. If this is not possible, he may try to throw a few drops of blood into his enemy's house or to burn them in his enemy's hearth. If this too may not prove practicable he may look for the footprints of his enemy on the dusty soil. When he

finds them and makes certain that they are his enemy's, he may pour the blood over the footprints and slip away. While performing any of these acts, the magician is also supposed to enchant some magical spells. If the magic bears results, the person is supposed to either lose his life instantaneously, or in short course of time his legs would get swollen and he may thus lose his life.

If an accident of this sort happens in the village and if there has been some dispute between the victim and some other member of the local community, the suspicion of the people of the victim's house is naturally aroused against their enemy. But before giving weight to their doubt they first consult the chief priest of the village. If the *Mugou* is well versed in his job, he is expected to be able to point out the culprit. After some divination during the night, he may give his verdict. If his readings support the suspicion of the people, they may lodge a strong protest to the sorcerer through a go-between. They may demand from him a penalty in the form of compensation for the loss they have sustained through his sorcery. If he confesses to have practised sorcery and agrees to pay the reparation for it, a compromise may be reached between the two parties. But if he tries to justify his act on the ground that he had to direct the magic upon the person to retaliate some prior harm done to him, the members of the victim's family may find themselves in a dilemma. Efforts are, however, made to arrive at a compromise without a reference to the village council.

Where the suspect denies the charge of black magic, the only course open before the aggrieved persons is to refer the case to the village council for decision. Once a case has been referred to this administrative agency, its decision becomes legally binding upon both the parties. If the village council finds the suspect not guilty, it may release him. But if the case seems doubtful and the victim's family members may insist on some strong action, the matter may have to be decided through ordeal.[1]

Another common type is *Fukhu-sisto-chasra* magic. The man who wants to practise this magic searches for teeth of any of the wild animals such as tiger, panther, beer, wild pig and snake. The teeth thus procured, can be regarded as the instrument for magic and serve the same purpose which the blood of a dog does in the earlier case. The magician may put the teeth over the footprints of the person on whom he wishes to aim his black magic. He also pronounces some spells to instil magical power in the object. The effect which this magical act is expected to produce is that one of the species of the animal, whose teeth may have been used for the magical rite, would ultimately kill the person on whom the magic has been directed. The time within which this black magic may be effective varies from about a fortnight to six months. Since the gap between the magical rite and its supposed effect is usually long, it may often become difficult to analyse the cause and to ascertain whether any magic was set in motion at all. Under any such accident the

[1] See the magic ordeal under chapter on Political Organization.

matter is decided in the normal way of reference to the village council or ultimately through ordeal.

The third type of magic, known as *Sutoun-sobbiey*, involves a more elaborate process. It also is said to be more effective. To practise this form of magic the magician has to procure the horns of either mithun or cow or of a wild animal of the mountainous region whom the people call *fulatmzou*, along with the teeth of crocodile. The horns and the teeth are put together over the footprints of the person on whom it is desired to direct the magic. Magical incantations are pronounced to infest the instrument of magic with supernatural powers. It is expected that in course of time either the abdomen of the person would get enlarged, or that he would be reduced to a skeleton and in either way would lose his life. The time taken by the magic to be effective may range from a month to about a year.

A form of magic, specially relied upon by the youths—those frustrated in love affairs—is known by the name of *Surrou*. It can be performed by a boy or a girl against his or her deceitful lover. The normal precedents of this type of magic are a sense of frustration and a feeling of revenge on the part of the magician. Moreover, the act is supposed to be performed in a mental state of utter despair and agony. A boy and a girl of the village fall in love and are bent upon marrying. In course of time the girl changes her mind and, led by some material consideration, later decides to marry some other boy. On knowing this, her lover feels disheartened and angry. In a moment of excited emotion he decides upon taking

revenge on her. He manages to procure one of her belongings, a necklace or a garment and identifies it with his beloved. He keeps the object in a hollow jar of bamboo and, plastering it from all sides, puts it into some pool or in the trunk of a tree. He also incants some spells at this time. The magic may bear the desired result within a year. If the object is kept under water, it is believed that her intestine would get enlarged or some other part of her body may be swollen. If the object is kept in a tree she may be reduced to a skeleton and lose her life.

A girl under similar circumstances may give vent to her feelings through some black magic directed against her deceitful lover. If she is unable to practise the magic herself, she may hire the services of some such magician who may command her faith. She may supply him with the object of magic in the shape of any of the belongings of her lover. He then performs his magic over the instrument on her behalf in the same way as she would have done herself. The magical act would then produce the wanted results upon the victim.

Like other magical practices, this magic also, when detected, is referred to the village council. If the performer of the magic (the boy or the girl) can move the hearts of the members of the council, convince them of provocation of a breach of faith, and thus justify his or her magical act as a reparation of the wrong done, he or she may save himself or herself from any penalties. Even otherwise, the punishment that may be meted out to the boy or the girl, as the case may be, is usually nothing

more than some heavy fine to compensate the sufferer.

Black magic of the Akas may thus be practised to serve various ends ; it may either serve some useful purpose to the performer or may merely be destructive to the victim.

V. THE PLACE OF RELIGION AND MAGIC IN AKA SOCIETY

In accounts of tribal communities, religion and magic are often treated together since there has been a growing emphasis to regard the two as complementary to each other. In many of the tribal societies, in fact, there might be some reason to treat them so. There man propitiates the gods or the deities and when his prayers to invoke their blessings or to obtain some concession fail to produce the desired results, he takes resort to magical powers.

In religion the powers are propitiated ; in magic, the help of the powers that may be supernatural is sought to produce results. The two differ essentially in principle, form and method though both presuppose a supernatural agency to produce effects.

In Aka society, religion and magic are far from being complementary to each other. Where religion in Aka society is a recognized pious behaviour, magic is regarded as 'anti-social' by its very nature. While religious ceremonies are always performed with good will and with a good aim in view, to bless the people with fortune or to ward off some evil influence, and do not in any way harm the interests of the community but, work for general welfare, magical practices are essentially destructive in nature and detrimental to

the interests of society. They are performed either with a view to take revenge upon someone or for personal gains even at the cost of harm to others. All magic in Aka society seems to be black magic and this possibly accounts for the apathy of the society towards it. The belief among the Akas is that the magical practices hamper free and sound living of an individual in society. It is considered a stab in the back and therefore highly deplorable. Magical practices, when brought to light, arouse great anger and resentment and the whole group (the village community) combines together to punish the magician who dares to threaten the interests of the society. Today no one dares to practise witchcraft in open and whenever any such act is detected or is suspected, the culprit is tried and subjected to heavy penalties where proved. A sorcerer is liable straightway to social excommunication and may even be forced to quit the village. The people believe that despite all the social restrictions and despite the antipathy of the society some people might still be engaged in practising sorcery secretly. Whenever any such act is reported or alleged in some village, the suspected sorcerer is at once summoned to appear before the village council and stand trial.

The Aka religion is based on a recognition of humanitarian principles ; magic utterly ignores them. The horizon of religion in the Aka society, as in all other societies, is wider and its importance greater than that of magic. Appeals against a magician are decided in effect by a priest as the village council which deals with the case and passes its judgment,

relies ultimately on the views of the *Mugou* whom it has to consult necessarily.

The strong attitude of the society against magic also suggests that the Akas have full faith in its efficacy and in its power to produce miraculous effects. Though it is no longer an approved practice, the elaborate theory of magic is known to the people to this day. It is thus possible that in the past magic may have had an important place in the Aka society.

EPILOGUE

The study of the Akas has given us some understanding of their culture. The study of their social organization has revealed to us their traditional beliefs and customs, their age-old institutions which have undergone little change in the course of centuries, their economic organization which is still based on the indigenous Jhuming and food-gathering pursuits. Their religion is concerned with natural forces which control and guide the entire human destiny. Their political life is organized on democratic principles, in which, however, personal talents play an equal part. Their ideas, beliefs, customs and practices, traditions and institutions, all play special roles and subserve some definite purpose in the total culture.

The main problem before the NEFA Administration concerning the Akas as well as other tribal people is, to borrow a quotation from Dr Margaret Mead, 'how can technical change be introduced with such regard for the culture-pattern that human values are preserved.'[1] The answer seems to lie in the aim that the NEFA policy has in view, that is to bring 'the best things of the modern world to the tribes, but in such a way that they will not destroy the traditional way of life, but will activate and develop all that is good in it.'[2]

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[1] Margaret Mead, editor, *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change,* Mentor Book Edition (New York, 1955), p. 7.

[2] Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA* (Shillong, 1959). p. 54.

Since the policy of the Administration is in consonance with the scientific approach to the problem of contact as it fundamentally denies 'a too fast change' and at the same time admits, in positive terms, 'a slow and gradual change', there do not seem to be any impending dangers of maladjustment or waning of the tribal culture.

It is neither desirable nor possible today to deny the advantages of science and technical knowledge to these or to any other tribal people. Dr Verrier Elwin, the Adviser for Tribal Affairs, while discussing the 'Fundamental Problem' in his *A Philosophy for NEFA*, has clearly laid down the principles of the policy : 'We see now that the tribal people will be of the greatest service to India if they are able to bring their own peculiar treasures into the common life, not by becoming a second rate copies of ourselves. Their moral virtues, their self-reliance, their courage, their artistic gifts, their cheerfulness are things we need. They need the comradeship, the technical knowledge, the wider view of the plains. The greatest problem is, how to develop the synthesis, how to bring the blessings and advantages of modern medicine, agriculture and education to them without destroying the rare and precious values of tribal life.'[1]

Our main purpose in describing the culture of the Akas has been to promote a sympathetic approach towards it, so that we, working for their utmost benefit with the best of intentions, may save ourselves from committing blunders out of ignorance of the back-

[1] Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA* (Shillong, 1959). p. 59.

ground. But we will be able to understand the people and their institutions better only if we learn to appreciate their cultural values. For this we need an approach to the people in a spirit of humility and service and with an attitude of respect. The deep interest of India's Prime Minister in the tribal problem has resulted in his humane and scientific ideals in regard to the tribal people, which have been expounded by him more than once. Dr Verrier Elwin has applied these ideals to concrete situations in NEFA. The problems of the tribal people of NEFA, we find, are common in many respects since all of them share a common habitat.

The aims have been laid before us. It only remains now for us to ensure that, as we acquire more and more knowledge about the people of the hills, they are properly fulfilled. If we can ensure the two things on our part—a sense of humility and a sympathy for the tribal culture—we shall be helping the Akas as well as other tribal people of these frontier areas to be united with the rest of India and thus shall be doing not only a service to the tribal people but also a true service to our country.

GLOSSARY

Angasa	—	the local term for children, both boys and girls.
Au	—	descriptive term of address for 'father'.
Ain	—	descriptive term of address for 'mother'.
Ama	—	classificatory term of address for one's 'elder sister'.
Aiya	—	classificatory term of address for one's 'elder brother'.
Alyou	—	classificatory term of address for 'father's younger brother'.
As	—	classificatory term of address for 'mother's brother' as well as 'mother's sister'.
Aeschperi	—	iron-made hearth-stand, *udhan* in Assamese.
Aarah	—	the distilled form of local drink.
Aku	—	sweet potato.
Auscha-gemso	—	a large piece of cloth given in bride-price.
Bela	—	a type of big pot used for storing as well as serving food.
Biu	—	a type of bamboo basket.
Basa	—	the local term for cloth given as a part of bride-price.
Chho	—	local name for a vegetable commonly known by the name of *kochu.*
Dao	—	a kind of sword used by the people.
Endi	—	a kind of cloth.
Emisa	—	a small piece of cloth given in bride-price.
Fa	—	the herb associated with the legend about the discovery of the staple drink of the people.
Fulbji	—	local term for peas.
Fumbin	—	a small edible plant gathered from the forest.
Fokki	—	a thread made of wool.
Fusva	—	small bamboo ear-rings.

Gichli — ear-rings of silver worn by women.
Gejjui — silver-made wristlets.
Gudu — a kind of cover worn over the legs for protection against flies.
Gizu — a kind of basket used for keeping the fish-catch.
Geebind — a kind of ear-ring.
Hazarikhoa — a term used for a section of the Akas in old writings.
Kutsun — a term used by some writers to denote a section of the Akas as distinguished from the other section of Kovatsun.
Kovatsun — another section of the Akas.
Kapaschor — a term used for the Kovatsun section of the Akas in some of the writings.
Kichhu — a bamboo jar used generally for storing the local drink.
Kachai — local name for millet.
Lenchhi — a fillet of silver chain-work worn by women.
Labenchi — a pulse similar to *urad.*
Libi — another kind of pulse similar to *urad.*
Librapa — local name for French-beans.
Lingchong — pine-wood.
Lao-pani — the most common staple drink of the people.
Lasanekchi — potatoes.
Melley — the village council.
Memsa — local term for girls below the age of puberty.
Mukhsa — local term for boys who have not attained adolescence.
Mukhou — the go-between or mediator.
Mugou — the village priest.
Musarga — a kind of ring-cap of bamboo.
Mon — a big vessel of bamboo.
Moo — local term for arrow.

Melu — a flat silver ornament of women.
Mingri — a distilled form of local drink.
Mithun — a semi-domesticated animal ; *bos frontalis.*
Mujou — porcupine.
Nium — classificatory term of address for one's 'younger sister' as well as 'niece'; the term used by girls also to address their 'younger brother'.
Nugum — local term for 'Rani' or queen.
Nichleu Nugo — local term for the 'chief of the village', correlated with the conception of ideal individual of the village community.
Nechi — a small granary attached to the house.
Nemkhowri — a small enclosure in the house serving as the main entrance.
Oescheri — an ancestral ornament of the house.
Oa — local name for paddy.
Pasa — a wild plant gathered as food.
Purje — common axe.
Pol — a kind of upper garment, a kind of long-coat.
Rin — a small cell in the house serving as store-room.
Rombin — a kind of big ear-bulb of silver worn by women.
Rembi — a kind of ear-ring.
Sejourin — a small enclosure made in the wall to keep firewood.
Schhou — a bamboo vessel used for bringing water from streams.
Schaspoo — a kind of bamboo flask used for drinking liquor.
Schri — a kind of cane basket.
Soukhou — a kind of frying-pot.
Shoshiu — an upper garment of men.
Shapoo — local name for commonly known *urad* (a pulse).

Sibei	—	local name for maize.
Sador	—	wrapper given in bride-price.
Sedi	—	musical instrument used in dances, a kind of beating-drum.
Thalmu	—	another musical instrument, cymbal.
Thumona	—	local term for a guest, a guest chamber and the institution of guest-visits.
Thouvon	—	an arrow container made of bamboo.
Tkeri	—	local term for bow.
Uluri	—	the main hall or compartment in the house.
Vee	—	the Jhum-field.
Vichhu	—	the process of Jhuming.
Wetz	—	local term for common dao or sword.
Wetpza	—	a big type of dao or sword.
Wetfa	—	a medium-sized dao or sword.
Wetza	—	a small-sized dao or sword.
Wetzchi	—	another kind of dao or sword.
Wenekchi	—	a kind of wild plant gathered from forest.

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