

Narola Ao McFayden
Union Presbyterian Seminary
mozerna@gmail.com
2014 REA Annual Meeting Nov 7-9

Reclaiming *Sobaliba*: The Vital Role of Culturally Relevant Moral Education to Counter Increasing Patterns of Violence against Women

Abstract: *Sobaliba* historically provided an indigenous moral code to guide people in Nagaland to responsible and harmonious living. A society that practiced *Sobaliba* valued, respected, and cared for every human being. With the introduction of Christianity, *Sobaliba* was de-emphasized as unique Christian approaches to the formation of faith were introduced. The loss of *Sobaliba* has led to violence against women. The church has a critical role in emphasizing the respect and care of all people and will be wise to reintroduce the moral code of *Sobaliba* for the cessation of violence against women.

Joy (*name changed*) was 15 years old. She was loved by her family and friends. She loved life and the beauty of God's creation. From a human standard she was mentally challenged, but in the eyes of God she was precious and beautiful. She was visiting her sister's family in Kohima, Nagaland, on the weekend of August 30, 2013, when two men from that village took her to a secluded place and raped her.

Grace (*name changed*) was a 35-year-old vibrant woman. Like any other woman of her age, she had great hopes and dreams for her future. She was loved by her family. She was a God-fearing woman with a great heart. She was visiting her sister's family in Dimapur, Nagaland, when she was gruesomely raped and murdered at night on July 4, 2013, in her sister's house. The rapist smashed her head with a brick, slit her throat, and inserted the knob of a broomstick into her vagina.

The justice system in Nagaland has failed Joy, Grace, and their respective families, as justice is not yet served. These two cases of sexual violence are examples of the blatant disregard and negation of women as human beings and the absence of compassion. This paper does not romanticize the past and suggest that Nagaland was free from violence. However, incidents like the ones mentioned above were unknown. Violence against women has increased 300 percent in Nagaland during the past ten years, a reality that cannot be ignored. This reality demands the attention and action of the church.

Nagaland is a small state in North East India. The Ao tribe is one of 16 major tribes in Nagaland. These tribes collectively are called Nagas. Nagas are the indigenous people of Nagaland. Each tribe has its own language, culture, and traditions. Nagas were known for their rich cultural heritage and the expectation of responsible citizenship. Except for occasional inter-tribe and inter-village feuds, the land was peaceful, with love and respect for each other. Nagas were also keenly aware of the interconnected nature of creation. They believed that each part of God's creation was interconnected and interdependent on each other for survival and growth. Hence, they lived in harmony with all living beings and cared for all guided by a strong moral code called *Sobaliba*. *Sobaliba* is an Ao term. Each tribe has its own version of the moral code

known by their distinct tribal term but similar in essence to *Sobaliba*. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus only on *Sobaliba*.

The people of the Ao tribe (Aos) believe that the essence of human beings is *Sobaliba*. *Sobaliba* made human beings distinct from non-human beings.¹ Nagas lived by the rhetoric “community first then me.” Community wellbeing came first and foremost, a philosophy that sustained the Naga community. Some implications of *Sobaliba* are as follows. Be generous and hospitable to the needy, the poor, the aged, and the stranger. Honor and respect everyone. Be unselfish with food and materials that nature provides. Speak the truth, avoid false witness, do not steal, cheat, or rob. Do not seek position, power, or self-glory. Protect and defend the community from harm. Raise children of *Sobaliba*. Work hard, learn traditional crafts, and have pride in the dignity of labor. Observe the norms and laws of the community, and care for the earth and everything in it. Do not kill nor torture any living beings.² *Sobaliba* offered a basic code for existence and led Aos through the ages in their relationship with others. This moral code guided the people on the “right path.” This principle is characterized by integrity, respect, compassion, simplicity, hard work, and selflessness. These characteristics underscored responsible living and the appreciation and valuing of the interconnected nature of human beings to each other and to the non-human creation. Morality in the Naga context was broadly described as learned communal values that were life-enhancing thus contributing to the common good.

A person of *Sobaliba* would never engage in raping a mentally challenged girl because the moral code of *Sobaliba* requires that one show compassion to everyone, especially those who need special care, and defend the helpless with one’s life. A person of *Sobaliba* would never dare to brutally rape and murder someone’s daughter because the moral code expects one to be trustworthy under any given circumstance. He is expected to respect life, care for it, and be a selfless model for youngsters. The moral code of *Sobaliba* is similar to Carol Gilligan’s “ethic of justice and care.”³ Unlike the goal of Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral development—to attain autonomy—Gilligan advocates for morality that is based on responsibility and valuing of human interconnectedness.⁴ The moral code of *Sobaliba* did not have stages which one strived to attain. Rather, the goal of *Sobaliba* was to nurture younger generations to contribute to the life-enhancement of everyone in the community. Its goal was to enable a person to live responsibly and value the interconnected nature of all God’s creation, thus contributing to the common good.

Sobaliba took place within the fabric of a community. Respect and honor from one’s peers and community was the most expensive currency of the community. Therefore, one did everything one could to maintain the respect and honor one had received from their peers and community. Hence, *Sobaliba* cannot be understood in isolation from community. The community was there to model *Sobaliba* and to be a guardian of it. If anyone strayed from this moral code and committed acts that were considered abominable, the village community made sure justice was served. Justice was swift and took place in the community context where the

¹ A. Wati Longchar, “Interaction Between Gospel and Culture Among the Nagas,” in *Encounter Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. A. Wati Longchar (Jorhat: Tribal Studies Centre, 1999), 55.

² *Ibid.*, 54-55.

³ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 63.

⁴ Mark A. Maddix, “Unite the Pair so Long Disjoined: Justice and Empathy in Moral Development Theory,” in *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, Vol. 8, no. 1 (2011): 50

offender admitted to the crime, thus acknowledging that a crime was not only committed against the victim but also against the family and the community as a whole. In a society that valued honor and respect, taking these away as a consequence of one's disregard of the Naga moral code was grave not only for him and his family but also for his descendants as people avoided associating with them.

Sobaliba was taught in traditional learning centers called *Aroju* for men and *Tsukimen* for women. *Aroju* and *Tsukimen* functioned as communal places of social interaction and learning. They were "the main pillars of the AOs social order."⁵ They were not only a place of learning but also the seats of sowing the seeds for responsible citizenship. These places of learning produced honest, generous, hardworking, compassionate, and selfless people. Moral development of young men and women took place through observing, story-telling, music, and hands-on activities. The elders in the family and parents modeled the way of *Sobaliba* through their lives. In rare cases where families failed to pass on these moral bearings, the *Aroju* and *Tsukimen* made sure younger generation learned these virtues through interaction with peers and through observation of and modeling by the elders in the community. The younger generation likewise interpreted life through observing and interacting with those around them. At the core of *Sobaliba* was a community that was intergenerational in nature.

With the coming of Christianity, the *Aroju* and *Tsukimen* were replaced by formal schools and Sunday schools where children learned math and science, and biblical stories replaced the teachings of *Sobaliba*. Christianity came to Nagaland in the early 1870s. Inspired by the evangelical missionary movement, Baptist missionaries who landed in Nagaland worked hard to bring all of the "heathens" to Christ. In order to do so they had to provide a lifestyle of complete contrast to that of the indigenous lifestyle. No attempts were made to understand and incorporate the values, beliefs, and culture of the indigenous people into their "new" Christian life. J. P. Mills, an ethnographer, writes that "no member of the Mission has ever studied Ao customs deeply, but nearly all have been eager to uproot what they neither understood nor sympathize with, and to substitute for it a superficial civilization."⁶ The Naga society was not perfect, but the moral code of *Sobaliba* effectively discouraged violence against anyone. Today women in Nagaland, like women in most parts of the world, live in fear of violence, especially sexual violence.

Sexual violence against women is a modern phenomenon in Nagaland. The last two decades have seen increasing violence against women, especially sexual violence. AOs do not have a word or term for sexual violence or rape. Today when there is rape, one hears the phrase *tashiyim agi raksatsüba maparen* which could be interpreted as "breaking/destroying using force," a term that in no way does justice to the physical, emotional, and psychological trauma of the victim. The term is parallel to an object been broken/destroyed which adds the layer of objectification of women. What then is sexual violence? "Sexual violence (SV) is any sexual act that is perpetrated against someone's will. SV encompasses a range of offenses, including a completed nonconsensual sex act (i.e., rape), an attempted nonconsensual sex act, abusive sexual contact (i.e., unwanted touching), and non-contact sexual abuse (e.g., threatened sexual violence,

⁵ Christoph von Furerhaimendorf, *Return to The Naked Nagas: An Anthropologist's View of Nagaland 1936-1970* (Delhi: Vikas Pubs House Pvt Ltd, 1976), 47.

⁶ J. P. Mills, *The Ao Naga*, Third edition (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 2003), 420-21.

exhibitionism, verbal sexual harassment).”⁷ Sexual violence according to Marie Fortune is “first and foremost, an act of violence, hatred, and aggression.”⁸ Sexual violence for this paper therefore is any attempted or completed sexual act without a woman’s approval, unwanted touching, unwanted sexual comments, threatened sexual violence, and internet sexual harassment. When such acts of violence take place within the Christian community, sexual violence must be considered a sin because it “violates the bodily integrity of another, thus denying a person the choice to determine her/his own boundaries and activities Sexual violence creates a victim, that is, someone who experiences her/his environment is unsafe and is never allowed to feel safe within her/his own body.”⁹

One is not born a rapist. No Naga man was born a rapist. Sexual violence must therefore be seen as a social problem, hence a learned behavior. The first step in addressing sexual violence is to acknowledge the presence of rape culture in Naga society and identify it as a social problem. Unlike the times of our ancestors, the worldview of the younger generation is now influenced by television, movies, magazines, computer games, and the internet. These sources convey conflicting moral messages. People learn violence by interacting with other violent individuals or consuming materials that venerate violence. The low-cost of internet connections and easy access to any electronic materials, especially violent materials and the disregard of Naga moral code, have intensified the predicament.

The work of Ken Plummer is insightful in understanding why men rape. Rape, to Plummer, is a premeditated act. He argues that rape is “locked in social meaning Rape is not the unleashing of male desire; it is rather the articulation of male meaning.”¹⁰ Accordingly, rape is a primary mode of social control.¹¹ Recent social media conversations on the issue and comments of some educated young Nagas confirm this statement. Some Naga men blame women for staying out late and wearing skimpy attire as causes of being raped, ignoring the facts that a mentally challenged girl or girls under the age of 10 are raped. Power, control, and negation of a woman as human are some possible reasons why men rape.

The public conversation of rape in Nagaland began when soldiers in the Indian Army began to use rape as a tool (under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act) to control the disturbed area.¹² Under this special power, soldiers raped Naga girls and women to intimate Naga men and control them. Girls grew up terrified of being raped by a soldier in the Indian Army. Rape was an evil and inhuman act that “the other,” a non-Naga, did to one of their own as a final blow to control the people and to demoralize the Nagas. That Naga men rape, therefore, is a horrible sign of how some Naga men articulate and enforce male meaning and social control. The moral codes

⁷ For more information see: “Sexual Violence: Definitions,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed July 17, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/definitions.html>.

⁸ Marie M. Fortune, “Sexual Violence: A Sin Against Women,” in *Women and Christianity*, ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan and Karen Jo Torjesen (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁰ Ken Plummer, “The Social Uses of Sexuality: Symbolic Interaction, Power and Rape,” in *Perspectives on Rape and Sexual Assault*, ed. June Hopkins, (London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹² Nagaland fought for independence from India long before the British left India in 1947. Nagaland therefore has its own revolutionary army who continues the struggle for independence. This is the reason Nagaland is classified as a disturbed area. “The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958,” accessed July 16, 2014, http://indianarmy.nic.in/Site/RTI/rti/MML/MML_VOLUME_3/CHAPTER_03/457.htm.

of *Sobaliba* clearly discouraged seeking of power, control, and self-glory. Rather, it taught Nagas to honor and respect everyone and protect and defend everyone from harm.

With *Aroju* and *Tsukimen* totally dismantled and obliterated, it is the churches' role to ensure that the younger generation grows in the knowledge of, appreciation for, and practice of what our ancestors once considered the essence of human beings. The principles of *Sobaliba* must be taught alongside Christian faith stories. Learning what it means to grow in the likeness of Christ should go hand in hand with learning how to contribute to the life-enhancement of everyone in the community. For this to take place, the Naga church must begin the difficult task of educating her people to appreciate and be proud of one's culture. Unless one is proud of one's culture (that was once labeled inferior and pagan) one cannot appreciate and see the good in its moral principles. Nagaland as a state cannot address the issue of sexual violence without the active participation of churches. With Christians comprising 95% percent of its population and more than half of them calling themselves faithful Christians, the church is where the movement to stop violence against women must begin.

In the span of less than three generation since we embraced Christianity, the Naga community is on the verge of losing our identity as Nagas and as Christians. *Sobaliba* kept the Nagas grounded. With *Aruju* and *Tsukimen* no more in existence, younger generations have lost the reinforcement available in the past. Today younger generations need someone to model for them the moral virtues of *Sobaliba* through repetition and reinforcement. This is where the church as an institution and as a community of faith must come in and model for and provide support to younger generations. When continuity that once existed is broken, the church as an institution must take the place of traditional learning institutions to revitalize the Naga moral code.

Christianity taught Nagas to be faithful Christians by loving the Supreme God. What was missing was how this love of God should be lived out within their context. Young people need their faith community to show them what it means to love God. Just as our ancestors taught the younger generation through their lives, we need faith communities today to do so. To love God is to care for the community of love that God initiated. It is to love all that reflects God's image, respect the worth of all human beings, including oneself, and seek the flourishing of all those created in the image of God. The younger generations also need someone to show them concrete examples of how to implement this love commandment in their personal lives, at home, at work, and in their relation to others in their community. This then will inspire them to live peaceably with self and others, respect self and others, value the interconnected nature of humanity, and strive toward right relationship with all those created in the image of God.

A Naga Christian person of *Sobaliba* will be kind to everyone, honest at work and at play, and care for the wellbeing of everyone. A Naga Christian person of *Sobaliba* will value and respect the sanctity of life by making sure that every person's life is respected and protected. A Naga Christian person of *Sobaliba* will work to see God in everyone—men and women—and that violence to any one of God's children is violence against all God's children, that violence against one woman is violence against the entire community. A Naga Christian person of *Sobaliba* will live responsibly with all of God's creation.

A Naga culturally relevant moral education calls for an intergenerational commitment where children are taught through the lived examples of adults. It calls for deeper conversations

and stronger relationships between and across generations to remember, value, and learn the Naga Christian moral code. It requires a community that is committed to fostering the moral development of the next generation. As children make meaning through interacting and negotiating meanings in their environment they need concrete and consistent messages both at home and outside their home. This demands that families and churches work together to educate the younger generation both in the ways of Jesus Christ and the Naga moral code that values and respect life, interconnectedness, and responsible living. When this becomes a reality, no influence of modern technology and media can break the spirit of community and the ethics of that community.

Bibliography

Fortune, Marie M. "Sexual Violence: A Sin Against Women." In *Women and Christianity*, edited by Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan and Karen Jo Torjesen, 203–224. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Longchar, A. Wati. "Interaction Between Gospel and Culture Among the Nagas." In *Encounter Between Gospel and Culture*, edited by A. Wati Longchar, 44–55. Jorhat: Tribal Studies Centre, 1999.

Maddix, Mark A. "Unite the Pair so Long Disjoined: Justice and Empathy in Moral Development Theory." In *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, Vol. 8, no. 1 (2011): 46-63.

Mills, J. P. *The Ao Naga*, Third edition. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Plummer, Ken. "The Social Uses of Sexuality: Symbolic Interaction, Power and Rape." In *Perspectives on Rape and Sexual Assault*, edited by June Hopkins, 37–55. London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984.

von Furerhaimendorf, Christoph. *Return to The Naked Nagas: An Anthropologist's View of Nagaland 1936–1970*. Delhi: Vikas Pubs House Pvt Ltd, 1976.