

Death rituals and afterlife: The Ao-Naga boatman of the dead in Temsula Ao's poems and the Greek mythological character of Charon

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Abstract

Death rituals and beliefs about the afterlife are uniquely marked by striking similarities on the one hand and also exhibit great variations across cultures, religions and geographies on the other hand. The paper intends to examine the Naga Ao belief of the boatman of the dead and ideas of the afterlife through the poems of Naga writer, Temsula Ao and compare it with the Greek boatman of the dead, Charon. How do these beliefs intersect, and are these intersections larger commentaries on other death rituals and beliefs. What are the reasons that the afterlife holds such sway in myth, ritual and religion? The epistemological and mythical underpinnings of these viewpoints open up myriad interpretations and also offer travelling back in time to exhibit that several ideas about death and the afterlife surpass usual compartmentalization of ethnicity, race, culture and religion owing to their highly enigmatic nature and also to their inability of scientific corroboration and concrete connections with human ontology. The purpose of this comparative analysis is thus to prove that the commonality between the Ao Boatman of the Dead and the Greek boatman Charon does not necessarily indicate any kind of exchange between the cultures but the ever-lingering strong human desire to adequately prepare the dead for the afterlife with the help of a spiritual guide on that onward journey. The dead cannot be left to fend for themselves and hence the boatman is emblematic of death as guided tour which is part of the debt that the living owe to the dead.

Key words: Death rituals, afterlife, boatman of the dead, Naga practices, Greek mythology, Charon

Introduction

Temsula Ao in her poem *Nowhere Boatman* crafts this mythical figure culled from an Ao-Naga belief of a boatman whose primary function is to ferry dead souls across the river between the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead. This boatman bears several similarities to Charon, the Greek mythological character who ferries souls across the river Styx. This similarity with Greek mythology is quite remarkable, as interactions between the tribe and the Greeks do not seem to have been possible at all. However, an equally opposite fact also holds good that such ideas of soul-ferryman and death-journey

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cut across cultures. Another interesting aspect of the boatman is that he does not do his job gratis but for a fee. Hopkinson and Kimberley articulate that the idea of the ferryman of Netherworld is not just prevalent in civilizations like that of Egypt and Greece but also found in other ancient cultures like the Yorubas of south Nigeria, Mesopotamia, Ancient Europe, Rome, and Norse of Denmark (Hopkinson *et al.*, 2008). They further mention that the practice of paying the ferryman with coins was disparaged as pagan practice but despite the power of the Catholic Church, this belief of paying the boatman survived into medieval and post-medieval times, though at a reduced rate.

Temsula Ao is celebrated for her poetry on Ao beliefs and practices and her collection of poems *Books of Songs* (2013) has an entire section *Songs from the Other Life* of poems revolving around Ao beliefs and customs which range from mythical imaginings about the first Ao people, death, afterlife, companion spirits and the like. A poem of the same collection, *Soul Bird*, tells of how, after death, the soul takes the form of a hawk and thus sighting one after a person's death was a good omen. These myths bear several similarities with Greek folklore pertaining to mysteries of death and afterlife and such an understanding enhances the etiology of an otherwise inexplicable geography of "this world" and "that world" and "underworld".

GJV Prasad in his introduction to Temsula Ao's poetry collection *Book of Songs* remarks of her that "she is a poet who sings of her life and that of her people. She searches for the past that has disappeared into the mists of time, for it is in the very unrealisability of that history that her people's troubled present arises; the disjunctions and dislocations in their past have given rise to their mistranslated and tense present" (Ao, 2013). *The Nowhere Boatman* is a poem of death (like the eponymous book itself) and brings before the reader the belief of the Ao people in the mystical boatman ferrying souls through the river of the dead and through this journey also negotiates several questions of identity of the Aos. Devastuti Sharma says that while Ao accepts that preserving unspoiled tribal culture is not attainable, she also acknowledges that this results in "cultural chaos" and this is what is perhaps hinted at in *Nowhere Boatman* where she describes the ageless boatman as being stuck on the river between two irreconcilable worlds, referring to the oscillation between perhaps, the conflicts and indecisiveness occurring in the minds of people while choosing between "indigenous identities and their globalized counterparts" (Sharma, 2015).

Poetry based on rituals, whether religious or folk have acted as important indicators of the relationship that communities have with the larger universe they inhabit. It points to beliefs that have established long lasting relationships of the individual to his/her environment and have gone far beyond temporal spaces to inhabit the transcendental plane. While ritual poetry in early Japan, for example, participated in more general complex beliefs and practices involving the magico-religious powers of special works (Ebersole, 1989), Margaret Alexiou's classic 1974 work *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* discusses the ritual lament as essentially functional in nature being only one part of a complex tradition of ritual custom and belief (Alexiou, 2002). Barabara Babcock in

her essay *Too Many, too few: Ritual Modes of Signification* says that Anthropologists like aestheticians, have generally identified art and ritual with “order and unity” defining the latter, for example as an “attempt to inspire logical necessity upon the vagrant affairs of the world” (Babcock, 1978). Neil Price, in his research on Viking-Age mortuary drama says that Viking-Age burials may have involved complex elements of mortuary theatre, ritual narratives literally enacted at the graveside, providing a poetic passage for the individual dead into a world of ancestral stories (Price, 2018).

Death Rituals: Anthropological Explanations

The discipline of Anthropology has been the site where rituals relating to death have been closely imagined. While such rituals differ greatly in manifestation across cultures and religions, anthropological interventions will reveal that the purpose of such rituals, bear a similarity of rationale, thus easily rending the culture/geography/religious divide. Death and death rituals has been the subject of study across cultures and beliefs. In many traditions, the symbolism of tombs and wombs are never far apart. “Death is an ending – we are indeed all going to die – but it is also a moment of transformation, potentiality, and beginning” (Simpson, 2018). The work of ritual officiants and the participants they assemble enable the dead to be resurrected and regenerated in ways that are meaningful to those that are left behind. In this regard, Robert Hertz’s intensive work on death rituals and his essay “A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death” which was written in 1960 still continues to be one of the most read articles on the subject.

He has also said that in most primitive societies the dead bodies are only stored, so to speak, in the tomb where they are first placed. After a time they are given a new funeral and they receive the final funerary rites which are due to them. This difference in Custom is not... a mere accident (Hertz, 1960). Death rituals go back to what people hold sacred and how they wish to ‘arrange’ for the dead. In June 2005 Pierre Lemonnier and Eric Venbrux organized a conference of the European Society for Oceanists (ESfO) in Marseille on ‘Spiritual material: Objects and change in mortuary ritual,’ where they returned to the basic tenet of Hertz’s theory that “to make a material object or living being pass from this world to the next, to free or create the soul, it must be destroyed. [...] As the visible object vanishes it is reconstructed in the beyond, transformed to a greater or lesser degree” (Hertz, 1960). There are cases in which the deceased’s intimate possessions are destroyed, but also instances in which objects of the dead are kept as relics or heirloom (Venbrux, 2007). When death rituals are performed, the expectation that the dead would be reborn into a new world and in a new body become paramount concerns. Every life-cycle ritual implies the passage of one group to another: an exclusion, i.e. a death, and a new integration, i.e. a rebirth. The rebirth which occurs at death is not only a denial but also a “reassertion of society and a renewal of life and creative power” (Bloch and Parry, 1982). The journey motif also points to this direction—a journey to a new place, among newer souls.

The afterlife is a pivotal concern that follows several death rituals and most rites

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of passage are seen as a path to this objective. Douglas Davies, in *Death, Ritual and Beliefs* says that both Hertz and Hocart placed great importance on mortuary rituals. While Hertz believes they serve some 'biological function of religion', one that saves man from surrender to death and destruction and reinforces the desire for life, Hocart placed great emphasis on ritual that helped people in 'securing life' or in 'promising life' (Davies, 2017). The death-life continuum occupies centre stage and making all necessary arrangements in terms of material possessions to be buried with the dead or elaborate rituals, all serve the purpose of preparing for what lies beyond. It is the duty of the family and the community to help the dead qualify to enjoy a journey of transcendence and hope. Thus, even after death, hope always exists and adequate measures have to be taken to allow the transition from the dead to the living.

The image of the Ao boatman has conspicuous similarities with the Greek mythical character Charon who takes souls across the river Acheron. The *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* defines Charon of Greek mythology as a ferryman of the dead. Hermes (the messenger of the gods) brings to him the souls of the deceased, and he ferries them across the river Acheron to Hades (Hell). Only the dead who are suitably buried or burned and who pay the obolus (silver coin) for their passage are accepted on his boat, which is why in ancient Greek burial rites the corpse always had an obolus placed under its tongue. A rather sombre and severe character, Charon does not hesitate to dislodge from his boat, without pity, the souls whose bodies received improper burial or cremation.

Reference to the fear of languishing in No-Man's land between the dead and the living have found echoes in several works of literature like *Antigone* by Sophocles and almost unforgettable among them all is Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and its description of Charon:

And lo! toward us in a bark
Comes on an old man, hoary white with eld,
Crying, "Woe to you, wicked spirits! hope not
Ever to see the sky again".

Even a legal luminary like Lord Alfred Denning in his book *The Discipline of Law* has used the imagery of the river Styx to talk about "the group of ghosts of dissatisfied testators...wait on the other bank of the Styx to receive the judicial personages," as these lawyers had misconstrued their wills, making their kin suffer (Levinson and Mailloux, 1988).

The Aos place the entrance to the world of the Dead which lies under the earth... and call the line of white rock leading up to it *layasuphu* (Mills, 1973). On their way to the land of the dead, the souls must cross a stream called Lungritsu, the boundary between the living and the dead. If a person reaches this stream, but does not cross it, he/she can return to the land of the living. The boatman of the dead has to be paid some coins (like Charon) to cross the other side of the river, where it is believed, they begin another

existence (Ao, 2013).

Temsula Ao in her poem *Nowhere Boatman*, fictionalizes the journey of the dead souls while she shifts the focus of her attention to the life of the boatman. She invests in him a primeval existence and a sorrowful longing, quite literally transferring the pain of the dead souls onto his own. The poem begins with the boatman saying that his passengers often ask him how long he has been plying this trade on the river between the “land of the living and the land of the dead,” a question he finds strange as he represents that which is ageless and he is not sure whether he belongs to the world of the dead or to the world of the living. He knows that he is ageless and timeless and he also knows that he can expect no deliverance from the primeval job that he has been doing. Temsula turns the image of the boatman into a character who seems to want deliverance himself- an inverted conundrum. He sees the valueless meaning of the coins that jingle in his boat:

A soul without a status,
Is how I see myself?
Fated to ply my trade
On this designated route. (38-41)
A little later he again ruminates on his status:
When my own immaterial
Existence knows not
Whether it can claim
Any kinship with the living
Or one day join the dead
Or on a final crossing. (51-56)

The image of the river separating the world of the dead and the world of the living is an idea intrinsic to Greek belief about death and the journey to heaven. Like them, the Ao Nagas believe that there is the world of the dead souls (Asuyim). In between the world of the dead and the world of the living there is a boundary line. The boundary line is a river called Lungritsu or Bitter water, as mentioned earlier (Vatsyayan, 1995). The boatman seems to be languishing on the borders himself:

What advantage
This petty exchange
For the un-remitting service
Of re-locating well-defined souls
In preordained spaces? (46-50)
And some lines later:
Yet I continue to exist.
An ageless, nameless

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Indispensable anomaly.

There is much controversy about the etymology of the word Ao, although according to local tradition as well as was observed by J.P. Mills, it is a corruption of the word Aor meaning going across the river Dikhu, a boundary river (Imchen, 1993) although there are many other explanations of the term as well. Crossing rivers however acts as a rite of passage in several traditions and in the Ao belief of life after death, a journey across the river becomes emblematic of physical transposition. The belief of crossing the river was an ancient belief much like the belief in Charon ferrying souls across Acheron.

Naga Practices of the Dead

Beliefs and practices related to death form an important part of the collective consciousness of every people. In tribal communities these beliefs and practices involve distinct and elaborate practices related to disposal of the death and belief in the afterlife. Among the Naga tribes, several practices were held to be common, but a great degree of variation existed among them in their practices. As early as 1854, Francis Jenkins made brief comments on the Angami funeral custom and on the manner of disposal of their enemy skulls. Angami is another major tribe of Nagaland and one of the most widely researched tribes of India. The Ao practice of the dead shares some similarities with that of other tribes of Nagaland. The Aos, Konyaks, Pohnurys, and Wanchos expose their dead on platforms close to the dwelling-houses of the living and often keep the corpse for a long time in the house (Kanungo, 2011). The corpse would be allowed to fall on the platform. In rich households the bodies were left to be smoke-dried on a platform for five and six days for women and men respectively and then on a fixed day, the corpse is taken to the burial ground and put on a machan and left till the machan rotted.

The traditional practices of the Nagas, like that of several tribes of the North Eastern region were affected by the coming of Christianity. Several of the practices that were followed for centuries were declared pagan-like by the missionaries. There were however, some points of convergence with regard to the perceptions of God, Heaven and Hell. The Nagas believed that there was a world to aspire for after the death of a human being and this translated roughly to the perception of Christian paradise. Hence even burial rituals prepared the dead for a life beyond, far from the definitions of human existence. Nagas believed in life after death and that the human spirits go either to the land of the dead or to paradise. The land of the dead was believed to be a dead and colourless underworld where one had to labour and cultivate whereas paradise was a land of complete abundance and bliss. With such a strong concept of paradise as part of Naga beliefs, the later Naga Christians believed that it was through Jesus Christ that they could attain paradise in the life after (Bendangjungshi, 2011).

Various myths related to the departed souls exist among the Aos. One strong belief is that the departed souls pass through 'Asür rikhüm', which is known as 'the gate of departed souls'. It is about one kilometer from Longkhum village. The souls after passing through this gate come to another place called 'Longri-tzü-lenden' (Longri-bitter, tzü-

water; lenden-valley). It is believed that the water in this valley is bitter because the departed souls quench their thirst at this place. They drink not only the water but also wash their heads with 'Shitsüng' (a kind of bitter seed which is used like soap). After crossing Longkhum village, they come upon a hill in Wokha where the female departed souls dry their clothes. The Aos called this particular place 'Lazasübo' (a place where maidens dry clothes). Since all the departed souls cross Longkhum village, people believe that a person should visit Longkhum village not only once but twice, so that they can bring back their souls who are believed to be left behind on their first visit.

Several religions of the world comprehend death as a kind of "journey between two worlds that can literally take time and involve challenges and obstacles" (Eller, 2007). Eller also tells us about how the Konyak Nagas declared that the dead needed to carry weapons on their trip to the future home, since each would meet and fight again all of the warriors that they had killed in battle while they were alive. In the afterlife, they believed conditions were similar to life and men were always reunited with their first wife (47). Temsula Ao in another poem *Soul-Bird*, tells of a Ao- Naga belief that when a person dies, the soul takes the form of bird, more specifically a hawk, an insect or even a caterpillar. The sighting of hawks soon after a person's death is considered to be a good omen suggesting "the transition is complete and it is the last appearance of the loved one on earth" (Ao, 201).

She slowly turns heavenwards (said by grandmother)
As her red-rimmed eyes
Settle on the circling silhouette
And then with a sudden
Unseemly whoop
She draws me closer
Whispering in my ear,
"See that keening bird in the sky?
That's your mother's soul
Saying her final good-bye
It is over
Come, let us go home now" (30-41)

There are several similarities between the beliefs related to death and rituals between the Ao Nagas and tribes of Borneo and Fiji as well. On the face of it, it appears to be coincidental but on close analysis it does not seem to be merely fortuitous. There could have been some exchanges between these different people during those times- not just casual but long standing in terms of some amount of acculturation. Similarities in ritual and beliefs of the afterlife can also be attributed to common beliefs of indigenous societies. The other God of the Aos - Tsungrem was Meyutsungba, the God of the "Land

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of the Dead". The belief of the people in existence of such a place for the dead was derived from the concept of the soul or *tanula* as the AOs call it which leaves the mortal body at death and travels to this land for another existence (Subba and Som, 2005).

Just as much as race, religion and ethnicities dictate diversities in beliefs, rituals and collective knowledge, it is also surprising how many similarities could exist in the realm of human experience. The similarity between the boatman of the dead in Greek mythology- Charon and the boatman of the dead in the Ao-Naga tradition is a striking similarity which creates scope for several anthropological interventions. The Ao rituals of the dead were elaborate like the Greeks, thus preparing the soul for inhabiting another world after traversing the land of the living.

The Greek Boatman of the Dead

In early Greek sources, some dead persons are led to the realm of the dead by Hermes in his role as escorter of souls (*psychopompos*). Hermes enchanted the souls of slain men with his wand and the souls fluttered after him like many birds. The image of Charon as a ferryman of the dead souls into the other world appeared at a later date (Hansen, 2004). In later sources we hear of the ferryman Charon, who for a fee transports the newly dead across the stream that separates the realm of the living from that of the dead. In order that the deceased person has the necessary fare, kinsfolk placed a coin in the mouth of the corpse. In the absence of purses and pockets, the mouth was one of the places that Greeks carried coins in daily life, so that it was natural to equip a body with Charon's fair (Hopkinson *et al.*, 2008).

Charon as a character finds mention in several works like Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Ben Jonson's *Cataline* and more famously "Dante's *The Divine Comedy*" among others. At Delphi there was a building called *Lesche* with the painting of Polygnotus portraying Charon. He seems to have derived his inspiration from the poem *Minyad* in which there is a passage about Theseus and Pirithous: "Then the bark of the dead which the old ferryman Charon was wont to guide, they found not at its moorings" (Sullivan, 1950).

Bzinkowski speaks of Charon in such a manner: The image of Dante's Charon is undoubtedly the one that has haunted European imagination and inspired painters such as Gustave Doré (1832-1883), French engraver and illustrator known, among other things, for his illustrations of *Divine Comedy*, or Alexander Litovchenko (1835-1890), a Russian painter, who was awarded a lesser gold medal for the picture of Charon transporting the dead (Bzinkowski, 2009).

The infernal ferryman is a recurrent figure, who takes the traveller to the land of the dead and in creating this journey, also creates a concept of physical location informed by the conviction that the dead must be somewhere and this concept is pervasive. (Fletcher, 2019). Philip Hardie observed that for both Virgil and Spenser, "the mythological underworld is a vivid setting for issues of cosmic, psychological, theological and moral

order and disorder” (Fletcher, 2019). The Boatman of the dead- Charon also appears as a mysterious personage who is man and yet, not alive and who is a soul himself, yet to be delivered. The interesting requirement of money that Charon collects as fare deepens the wordly versus the spiritual debate as Charon has no use for money, but money is an important rite of passage. This goes back to the Greek belief that materialistic objects would be required by the dead when they passed into a new world and all arrangements had to be made for the new life that the dead were to lead. The river and the journey across it also have similarities in many cultures as journeying across seas and rivers, like the quintessential treks up mountains to religious places, were seen as almost mandatory pilgrimage journey and essential for the pilgrim’s progress.

Greek Rituals of the Dead

Death, in Greek belief, was never a mere event; it was a transition- one that required elaborate preparation and rituals to be afterworld-ready. These included not merely spiritual preparedness but also attention to physical requirements and protection of the dead body. Emily Vemeule says that the Greek traditions of burial have “the longest surviving and most powerful of all traditions” which saw no visible change from the later Bronze Age to the Hellenistic World and apart from the “intervention of the church into private conduct”, it is unchanged even today (*Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, 1979). The dead were considered sacred entities and their influence existed far beyond the limits of the cemeteries. Herodotus provides a textbook example of how relations between the living and the dead were meant to function. He said that the dead demand proper funerals which “ought to include gifts which they can use in the afterlife”. The living for their part can “expect the dead’s cooperation so long as they keep the dead happy” (Johnston, 1999). Death rituals are first and foremost rites of passage, and Greek death rituals very often seem “quite foreign, bizarre and “exotic” to people from the north of Europe and the US” (Haland, 2014). Yet they form a part of everyday practice.

The rituals that the Greeks performed for the dead consisted of both elaborate as well as systematic procedures. Prothesis, Ekphora, and Commemorative Feasts were generally the stages of preparing the body, burial and after-burial celebrations. As part of Prothesis, the body was left in a breath of air. Thereafter it was bathed and anointed. To ensure successful passage across the river Styx, a coin was placed in the deceased’s mouth to pay for the ferry. Throughout this time, haunting laments could be heard by both family members as well as by professionals hired to lament. In the early hours of the morning following prothesis, the dead was carried by pallbearers or by a horse-drawn carriage along the streets in order to reach the cemetery for the burial. This procession, called ekphora, included musicians, friends, and family, all involved in lament and general expression of grief. The ancient Greeks were greatly encouraged to mourn publically in solidarity with the dead. Once the procession reached the cemetery, the deceased was placed in a larnax, a small, often elaborately carved box. From there, it was either cremated on a funeral pyre or interred, the grave marked by a commemorative stele to ensure that the departed would not soon be forgotten. Following the burial or cremation, a feast hosted was a mark of

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gratitude to those who participated in the funeral rites. Owing to the importance given to perpetual remembrance of the dead, there was an emphasis placed on visiting the grave, particularly on the 3rd, 9th, 13th, and 30th days after the burial took place. The tomb was decorated and offerings were made in the form of food and wine (*A History of Greek Funerals*).

There even was an elaborate manner in which the dead body had to be laid on the floor and all rituals were sacrosanct in this matter. As soon as the "moment of dying" was over, the body was prepared for the wake. The mouth and the eyes were closed and the body was washed, anointed and dressed by the women, usually in white. The body was then laid on a bier with the feet towards the door. Sometimes it was strewn with marjoram, celery leaves and other herbs, believed to ward off evil spirits (Alexiou, 2002). The Libations that were to be given to the dead were also elaborate and had to be administered in a certain way. Readers of Greek literature have seen its importance in *Antigone and The Eumenides*. The Furies and their unappeasing nature were also closely tied to the libations. The libation, in general terms is a liquid poured out as a consecration. It was done to the accompaniment of simple prayer. Patton says that in chthonian sacrifice it sinks to the ground- if "honey, milk or oil, literally understood as nourishment for the dead, or if water, their bath; it may also head to the underworld in honour of the powers who dwell below" (*Religion of the Gods*, 2009).

The importance accorded to the dead in Greek traditions account for the elaborate rituals and the endearing connections that the dead were to have with the living also engendered this reverence. This dictated several beliefs and practices which have kept the life-death continuum going for millennia.

Conclusion

Thus, the similarities between the Ao boatman and the Greek boatman of the dead bring out significant mythological, theological and temporal aspects about death, the afterlife and ways of equipping a human being for these experiences. Tamsula Ao, by depicting the boatman as a languishing figure also makes the character symbolic of certain questions related to identity, the tribe and indigenous concerns. The many efforts that the living make to provide the dead with the wherewithal for the afterlife adequately proves that the living and the dead can never be severed. This unique relationship is perpetuated both through ritualistic practice and commemorative ceremony, thus showing both the enduring as well as enigmatic nature of death and rituals related to it. The vision of the afterlife and journey as leitmotif only assist in the understanding of this complex matrix. Death, by its very definition states a closure, but death rituals and the boatmen of the dead present in themselves, a vision of life after death and that continuum which has intrigued civilizations and cultures.

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