



## Nso Magico-religious practices

by B. T. SAKAH

Long before the missionaries set foot in Nso, the people were living in organised communities. They believed in God and accepted the existence of supernatural forces, which they worshipped. They knew perfectly well that God made them; that he gave them their land. They believed that God was the author of good and evil. Some, however, held that everyone had his own god. There was generally no accepted idea of one supreme God, the Creator of the whole universe.

Each compound had a sacred place of worship (kire ke nyuy) and special sacrifice (chu). The lineage head held secular authority and, as occasion demanded, assumed the role of a priest; then he became an intermediary between God and the people of his lineage. He initiated and performed sacrifices when someone was taken seriously ill, when a child was born, when there was a prolonged draught and when crops were planted or harvested. There were two aims for sacrifice - to thank God for his gifts and to appease his wrath.

The Nso have a special naming ceremony for certain children born under certain conditions. They were called **Won-nyuy** "children of God". These children are either twins or those born with the umbilical cord around their necks, or those who become very sickly after birth. Such illness is attributed to the failure to give the child an appropriate or suitable name that should be borne by a "child of God". Consequently, he undergoes the naming ceremony according to certain rites. The first son is called **Lukong**, the second is named **Tatah**, the third **Ngong** and the fourth **Tukov**. The origin of the name Tukov cannot be traced. It is believed, however, to have come from Fumban in East Cameroon. When the eldest son is called Lukong, the father is known as **Ta-Lukong** (literally father of Lukong), and the mother is **Ye-Lukong** (mother of Lukong). If the eldest daughter is named Biy, her father is known as Tabiy and her mother as Yebiy.

The naming of "children of God" is in three stages. At birth every "child of God" is called Tumi. Later he is given a

name like Wirba, Wirbon, Wirnkar, Tukov, Wirnkor and so on. The naming ceremony takes place at the beginning of the dry season, (sani) during which the native priest that officiates is called Tanyuy and the priestess Yenyuy. The Godfather is called Tanle and the Godmother Yewonle.

Tanle is usually the oldest man in the compound. There is only one Tanle and one Yewonle for all the "children of God" named at the same time. The naming ceremony is very simple. Salt is given to the child. His ears are closed and he is told that he is not to listen to the world (la yo ayuri vinyo), that is, to the wicked cravings of this life.

Children who are not Won-Nyuy are given names for which there is always a meaning: e.g. **Fonyuy** means God-given.

It was the belief in God and gods that gave Christianity a firm footing in Nso. It was the apparent fear of supernatural punishment that made the people obedient and just.

The people believed in witchcraft and had no scientific knowledge. The causes of diseases were unknown. They held that God meant that one should die only in old age; when a youth or a child died, someone was suspected. Usually suspicion fell on the oldest man or woman or on someone who was becoming very prosperous. The suspects were forced to pray over the sick. If he recovered, they were saved; if he died, they were beaten up or punished severely, and sometimes driven out of the compound. They were constrained to bring their god of witchcraft (nyuy arim) as a token. This could even be an insect. The God of witchcraft was then burnt so that he might not instil wicked inclinations into the people. Symbolism played a big role among the Nso people.

If a prosperous young man died, it was held that he wanted to accumulate wealth and had gone to steal it from the gods who, subsequently, killed him. If there was a prosperous youth in a compound and someone died it was said that he had sold the man to become wealthier. How the people came to these beliefs is a matter for conjecture; but the beliefs are not uncommon.

When someone died suddenly or hanged himself the suspicion was that he knew of his approaching death, that he was a witch or wizard who had eaten people brought by his associates and had no one to give in return. It was held that withces and wizards could only bewitch their relatives.

Sacrifices were made and prayers said in earnest when someone was critically ill. They believed that the spirits of dead relatives could cause death. When a child or an adult was ill, a chicken was sacrificed to appease the anger of ancestors. The lineage head placed the chicken on the door-step, called the name of

the angry ancestor in question, and of other important ancestors and said a prayer to them (**ankfe ve laa**) to bring peace and prosperity to the home. The chicken was killed, roasted and eaten and the feathers put on the dead ancestor's grave. This sacrifice (ntangri) could only be performed by the lineage head. If he was ill, a lineage head related to him did it. If the dead man suspected of having caused the illness was in the maternal grandfather's or grandmother's home, the sacrifice (**ntangri tayi**) was made on the road leading to the home. The scapegoat (bvei ntangri) was left to roam about.

There were magicians and witch-doctors in Nso. These men claimed supernatural powers. They claimed that they could detect the witches and the wizards in any compound. When there was misfortune or illness in any compound they rushed there to make a fortune. They were richly rewarded for their magical performances. They would put on a fearsome bearded juju (**kighev shu**) and thoroughly search the compound. They would announce the names of the witches and wizards (**arim vela fo**). Usually they found out by clever questioning those who had had a misunderstanding with the sick and accused them. Bitter feelings and jealousy (*shiliv she bishii wuna kigheki*) were regarded as symptoms of witchcraft.

Sometimes the accused would not accept the verdict passed on him. He would then appeal to the owner of an oracle (**nggaju**). All the elders would then go with him to the **nggaju** who either confirmed the verdict or accused another person. This practice (**ju-u**) was common before the European came. In cases of sudden illness, the elders consulted a diviner (**ngga kilun**) whose findings were presented in ambiguous terms. He would say that the cause of the illness was either this or that. He bade the consultant try both measures. Sometimes he soothed their sad spirits by assuring them that the sick would survive and that he would still eat of the next fresh corn.

The suspected person (**rim**) was forced to pray over the sick child or adult. As a precaution against witchcraft, all the people in a village were obliged to undergo a certain ceremony which entailed the drinking of a certain concoction called **nguv**. The priest (**tanguv**) recited certain magical incantations when each man was drinking it. **Nguv** was a very solemn ritual.

It was held that when witches and wizard came to drink, they would not see the pot. They were then detected and punished. It was further held that anyone who bewitched a person after drinking the drug would split into two halves magically, (**nguv wa wa win shui**).

There were at the cross-roads sacred spots consecrated for the storage of preservative drugs (**ntamir**). All lost property was kept

here for the owners to come and collect them. No one dared steal from there as it would eventually bring down God's anger and misfortune upon the thief. Stealing brought shame on the whole family. It was held that witches and wizards took the form of birds of the owl family (**viweng**).

The people treated strangers kindly. They believed that gods could take human forms. A mother going on a journey prepared food, (**kur wan**) or metaphorically, (**nkawwan**). Anyone met on the road, was asked to partake of the food. Children who were not sufficiently liberal or were stingy were always warned that they would fail to give a god a present, (**a wiy ngwei Nyuy kifa**).

It can be said that in the past, the people of Nso based their beliefs and government on the fear of God and that their religious nature made them upright and obedient long before the introduction of formal education.

At present there is a rapid decline in the traditional magico-religious practices of the Nso people. This has been brought about by the influences of western civilization and christianity.

The belief in many gods is now dying out. Missioners have taught the Nso to believe in one supreme God, immortal, all powerful and omniscient, Father of all, Creator of all things animate and inanimate and of the whole universe who will judge the living and the dead on the Last Day and who will punish or reward them accordingly.

Despite their serious preaching, there are still those who continue to worship in their own way and who think that the gods of their land have more sympathy for them than the God of Europe as they call the "God of Christianity". They still speak of (**Anyuy Nso**) the gods of Nso.

The opening of hospitals has greatly dissipated the belief that illness was caused by the spirits of ancestors, and has also considerably destroyed the faith in diviners who attempted to interpret the causes of death and illness.

The fear of God and spirits helped to mould the character of the people. Hence every Nso man was loyal to parental as well as to civil authorities as the laws (**Nser nso nsai**) were believed to have come down from the gods. Stealing and other crimes are increasing in the country as a result of the western way of life, people give themselves airs, think freely, and act without fear.



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