

Polytheism to Monotheism: Impact of Christianity among the Tangkhul Naga Tribe of North-East India

RIMAI JOY

*Amity Institute of Anthropology, Amity University,
Noida Sec 125, Uttar Pradesh
E-mail: rimajoy@gmail.com*

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ABSTRACT: Religion as one of the basic institution is a system of beliefs usually involving the worship of supernatural forces or beings which continues to have major influence on human society. This article is an attempt to discuss a sea of change in religion among a rural tribal community who were living a relatively isolated life in the North-Eastern part of India. The people had a traditional religion but with the coming of Western missionary they are now living a converted Christian life. The author has discussed how the change from polytheism to monotheism has taken place among Tangkhul Naga tribe of North-East India.

INTRODUCTION

The research article is an outcome of intensive fieldwork among a tribe in North-East India called Tangkhul Naga for six months. The tribal community which is under study had their own traditional, ancestral religion but they are now living a converted Christian life. The Tangkhul Naga tribe constitutes the major bulk of the population among the hill tribes of Manipur State of India occupying a District called Ukhrul which constitutes 4409 sq km out of the total 22,356 sq km of Manipur with a population of 183,115 (Census of India, 2011). They are mongoloid stock speaking Tibeto-Burman dialect and the district carves an international boundary with Myanmar (Burma) (Shimray, 2007).

During my research I wanted to find out about their religion, specifically on the religion they are following now, the God they worship and about different rituals and ceremonies and about the religion they have left behind, the abandoned traditional religion and the way Christianity swept across the

entire hills. Another very important discussed in this research article is on the way Christianity swept across this indigenous tribal community and the process of conversion. Finally analyse the life of the people after conversion. So the current research article is the product of my research among a tribal community who had a drastic change from head hunting live to a new Christian convert.

METHODOLOGY

The research article is part of the fieldwork conducted for Ph.D. thesis so the first authorization and permission comes from the University through the Ph.D. supervisor and the Head of the Department. On reaching the field, all the informants were informed from the beginning and in the process of collecting data that their identity will be protected and such none of their names will figure at any time of my research publication but the rapport established to the level that many people from the tribe had no problem even if their name figured. The topic of research being on religion, observation played an important role, observing the people in the religious

Assistant Professor

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settings, in the religious festivals, rituals, and their normal day to day life sometimes compelling me to be part of the event but that only helps me find the answer to the present converted Christianity so to look back into a religion that had been abolished, oral narration played an important role. There were elders among the tribe who were living a traditional life and are now living a converted Christian life. Sitting down with them and interviewing them for days converting them into months yielded enormous amount of data on the traditional religion called *Hao*. Even to a small tribal community like the Tangkhul Naga, literacy and migration has its impact so administering questionnaire consisting both open-ended and close-ended was an important part of the five years research. From a mere interaction to structured interview was another blend that was used trying to confine to the topic. Other methodology that shaped the whole research includes genealogy, life history and many mechanical aid such as photography to capture their religious setting and a recorder to recollect and listen to their narrations as writing all the narration at the time of interview was not possible.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Religion as one of the basic institution (Srivastava, '97) is a system of beliefs usually involving the worship of supernatural forces or beings. Religious beliefs provide shape and meaning to one's perception of the universe. In other words, it is the religion that people lean on to, when inexplicable things happen which is beyond their control. For most religious people, their beliefs about the supernatural are at the very core of their worldview. Thus religion is a set of beliefs and practices generally held by an individual and community involving adherence to codified beliefs and rituals. Religion is both personal and communal faith stemming from shared conviction. Therefore it is an abstract set of ideas, values or experiences developed as a part of cultural matrix.

Sir James Frazer (1932) said, there is probably no subject in the world about which opinions differ so much as the nature of religion, and to frame a definition of it which would satisfy everyone must obviously be impossible. All that a writer can do first is to say clearly what he meant by religion and after

wards to employ the word consistently in that sense throughout his work (Frazer, '32: 224).

According to Sinha ('77:11) religion is a subject of great concern even in an advanced society of today where futility of science has often compelled man to search for God, or a supernatural power so that his faith in the order of things is not absolutely lost. Science is based essentially on the cause effect theory and certain natural laws or axioms. Religion is based on simple faith imbued with a sense of supernaturalism. Religion in preliterate societies exercises a more profound influence over man's thoughts and behaviour who ultimately surrender all their actions to him.

My area of research interest was also on religion among the Tangkhul Naga tribe who occupy the North-Eastern part of India. The people had a religion called *Hao* but with the coming of Western missionaries, the people have now embraced Christianity. A paradigm change in their faith which has become an important area of research.

Weber ('22) said it is not possible to define religion, to say what it "is," at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The "essence" of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action. The external courses of religious behaviour are so diverse that an understanding of this behaviour can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, notion, and purposes of the individuals concerned—in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behaviour. To define religion for the people of Tangkhul was easy if the definition was to be given based on the Christian faith they have at present but to define it from the traditional religion the people had, was one tough thing. There was no god, there was no name to their religion, rather only the spirits which also vary from village to village. The outcome of my six months effort to study their religion can be analysed in the following way.

Sinha ('77) who wrote about the religion of the North-East India said; the religion, as discovered in the North-Eastern cultural region is different from what it is in other parts of tribal India. There are as many as thirty tribes speaking some fifty different

dialects and living in these far stretched regions of North-East Frontier, spread over some thirty thousand square miles in what I call a continuous cultural belt. Each tribe here has its own distinct religion which they have maintained over ages, uninfluenced by any cultural traits. They have some elements of religion in common, such as naturism or animism propelling a belief in the hierarchy of functional gods, deities and spirit reigning over them in a kind of kingdom and in a soul-substance hovering around their life. They have a basic philosophy of religion which binds them all and invokes their faith in the supernatural. Their whole religion can be better studied as forming a part of some great cultural system (Sinha, '77: 6). Therefore religion is a basic social and universal institution.

DISCUSSION

Traditional Religion of The Tangkhul Naga

On the religion of Tangkhul Naga tribe, Hodson ('11) wrote; among the Tangkhuls the deity *Kamyou* is approached by sacrifice when men are ill. Yet they have *maibas* (priest), true magicians, who kill a fowl and then pick a small stone out of the side of the patient, who then gets well. When I saw this performance, both men were nearly naked, the sick men lay on the ground in a high fever. The *maiba* killed the fowl and declared that the omens were favourable. He then knelt on the man, pummelled him unmercifully for about five minutes, suddenly made a dart at him and produce from a small bleeding wound in the side a tiny stone about the size of a pea, which the *maiba* told me was a '*lai*' which had caused the sickness. I could not see how and where the *maiba* secreted the stone, as he had only a loin cloth on at the time, nor could I make out the mutterings of the *maiba* as he bent over his patient. Perhaps the violent massage did it, or it may have been a case of faith healing but the man was decidedly better in a short while. (Hodson, '89: 136). The sacrifices made to cure the sickness are eggs, fowls, dogs, or pigs. It is perhaps more than a mere coincidence that the omens are taken by means of these creatures (Hodson, '89: 137).

Though the work done by Hodson has given us a detail description of the healing ritual but as an insider I cannot help but criticise. The spirit people worship

was called *kameo* and not *kamyou* while the priest was called *khunong* and *maiba* is a term used by the Meitei people so is *lai* which is called *chipee* by the Tangkhul people. Rather than criticise Hodson, the purpose of this article is to present the people as it is on their conversion from traditional religion to Christianity which according to Tylor ('29) is a development of religion from polytheism to monotheism.

Sinha ('77:11) said religion is a subject of great concern even in an advanced society of today where futility of science has often compelled man to search for God, or a supernatural power so that his faith in the order of things is not absolutely lost. Science is based essentially on the cause effect theory and certain natural laws or axioms. Religion is based on simple faith imbued with a sense of supernaturalism. Religion in preliterate societies exercises a more profound influence over man's thoughts and behaviour who ultimately surrender all their actions to him.

Since time immemorial, the people of Tangkhul had a religion locally known to them as *Hao* which was believed in the spiritual beings that existed in various forms and in many places and they called this spirits as *Kameo*. According to the definition given by E. B. Tylor (1929), religion is "the belief in spiritual beings" and argued that these beliefs exist in all known societies (Tylor, '29: 424). It is this spiritual beings given by Tylor ('29) which the people of Tangkhul called *kameo*. The people believed that humans have soul but *kameo* lives in the form of spirits. It is not just one spirit but many and in many forms according to different location. Every place for Tangkhul is associated with a spirit and if there is a place there will be a spirit of that place who is supposed to be feared and propitiated. It is for this many *kameo* that the people who witness *Hao* and who are now living a converted Christian life recollect those days as days of offering, killing, sacrifice taking away the best domesticated animal, offering the biggest animal, giving away the biggest share, the best harvest, etc.

Tylor ('29) argue that "evolution of religion has passed through the development processes of animism to polytheism and finally to monotheism" (Tylor, '29:424). *Hao* religion is polytheism in its sense that the spirit (*kameo*) they worshiped were so many that a particular *kameo* might not be given any specific

name rather it is the place that *kameo* is associated with and they are named according to the place. For instance the spirit that lives in the field would be called field spirit (*lui kameo*), the spirit that lives in the mountain will be called mountain spirit (*kaphung kameo*), so is the river spirit (*kong kameo*), house spirit (*shim kameo*), etc (Khamuiwo, '99).

During my research for the meaning of this religion it was found that there was no religion as *Hao*, the people themselves had never given any term to the religion they follow and there was no name as to what they worship. It was the spirits that people worshipped and was known by the term *kameo*. *Hao* was an external term given by the Kings of Meitei who live in the plain of the State Manipur (India). This reminded me of the so called tribes, the people of Tangkhul Naga also came under the Scheduled Tribe of Indian constitution but the people had no idea that they came under Scheduled Tribes as the people were living their own self-sufficient and self-sustenance economy (Zeliang, 2005). Therefore *Hao* was neither referred to religion nor to the Tangkhul Naga alone but to all the tribes living in the hills of Manipur such as Kuki, Kabui, Maring, Mao, Poumai, etc who had their own traditional religion. Therefore *Hao* is associated with the hill tribes and with the coming of Christianity this term has come to use for those who practice their traditional religion and called them as *haomi* (People of *Hao*).

Therefore to give a concrete definition of religion from the context of *Hao* became even harder. Weber ('22) said that it is possible to define religion, to say what it "is," at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The "essence" of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action. The external courses of religious behaviour are so diverse that an understanding of this behaviour can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, notion, and purposes of the individuals concerned—in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behaviour's. There was no clear concept of god, there was no name to the religion they follow, and also the spirits varies from village to village. So in my six months of intensive fieldwork I decided to present the religion as it is.

Sir James Frazer said "by religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct or control the course of nature of human life" (Frazer, '32:222). This spirits who lives in different forms were much superior to men, they have the power to harm and to heal which is something beyond the inexplicable force of mankind. For the people of Tangkhul it is the spirit that controls the human life. The concept of spirits were so strongly rooted that every spheres of their life was enveloped by the concept of propitiating and offering sacrifices of animals such as Indian boar (*seichang*), pig, dog, fowl, etc seems to be sufficient in their estimation to cover their sins or to heal their sickness (Solo, 2010:45) but within this spirits controlled life of Tangkhul Naga, somewhere the concept of supreme God was embedded. The first western Christian missionary William Pettigrew wrote in his diary in 1905.

"The Tangkhul Nagas, like all the other tribes in these hills, believe in the supreme being, known by the name Varivara, who made the world but is not much interested in its inhabitants. Far more important to the average man are the numerous kameos 'demons' who are supposed to inhabit every hill and stream. Every illness and every failure of the crops is put down to the influenced of some demon; propitiating them consumes the whole of hill man's existence" (Solo, 2010: 39).

The supreme god which is not seek after is also called by different name called 'Varivara' (God) '*Kazing Ngalei Kasa Akhava*' -the creator of Heaven and Earth, '*Kazingwung' Ngaleiwung' Ameowa*, etc. The reason why the people could not address the God directly is that 'HE' is so great that it was incomprehensible to the mind of the ancestors or call upon their name in vain. True to this reverential, the *Varivara* is less associated with the people of Tangkhul and thus it is for this reason that people lives with the sacrifices and offerings to the spirit instead of god. The name of the supreme god is seldom taken and is invoked in instances when it is much beyond their control. E.g. If a rich man or a strong man makes fun or take advantages of the poor or the weak, then the poor one or the weak would curse in the name of supreme god saying let the supreme god take note of this and be the judge (Zimik, 2006:14). *Varivara*

remained unclear and less sought after until Christianity brought the concept of Jesus who brought *Varivara* closer to the people.

For Geertz, “religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz, '96:4), for the people of Tangkhul the concept of spirit ruling the people, harming and healing was what they were living with. This spirits were not revered rather it was the fear of spirits harming the people that makes them offer sacrifice. It was the fear of destroying the paddy field, holding hostage of the human soul which makes them propitiate instead of love and reverence. It was this risk that the villagers cannot afford to take.

The numbers of spirits were so many but some of the most important and common ones are given below:

1. Spirit of House (*Shim Kameo*) that lived in the house and all the offering had to be done to this spirit relating to the household. It was hanged in the middle of the main room in a pot covered by a piece of clothe where few feathers were inserted in it as a dress for the spirit.
2. Mountain spirit (*Kaphung Kameo*) is the spirit that lived in the mountain.
3. River spirit (*Kong Kameo*) is the spirit that lived in the river or any stream.
4. Spirit of the forest (*Khara Ngahong Kameo*).
5. Spirit of sickness (*Kazat Kameo*) the spirit that makes the people sick and that makes the people get well.
6. Spirit of field (*Lui Kameo*) the spirit that destroys the field, etc.
7. *Kokto* is the spirit that lives at the entrance of another world where the departed soul goes called *Kazeiram*. Every human soul after dying and separating from body must face *Kokto* to go to *Kazeiram* (Rimai, '78).

With this number of spirits, every festivals and rituals of the people were associated with one or the other spirit.

COMING OF CHRISTIANITY

Like in most of the places where Christianity followed colonial rule, Arthington Aborigines Mission (ABM) first started the mission in the State and Rev. William Pettigrew was the first missionary who came to Manipur from Edinburgh, Scotland, under the sponsorship of the Arthington Aborigines Mission (Imchen, 2002). Maj. Maxwell was the then political agent of Manipur who had earlier in many circumstances denied permission to missionaries to enter and preach in the Manipur. When Maj. Maxwell went on furlough appointing Mr. Porteous as acting Political Agent of Manipur, Pettigrew took the advantage of the change in leadership and sought permission again which was granted. Pettigrew then arrived in Imphal the capital of Manipur on February 6, 1894 and started a school with four boys. He then started translating books and writing in Manipuri languages. In the midst of School he also preaches the gospel of Christianity to the Hindu Manipuri people.

When Maj. Maxwell returned from furlough he found Hindu Meitei's alarmed by Pettigrew's work as a deliberate imposed of government's religion upon the people, a religion from outside. So Maxwell immediately asked Pettigrew to leave Imphal but suggested that he could work in the hills of Manipur at his own risk. Apparently Pettigrew accepted this suggestion as a challenge to his ministry. Pettigrew then desperately started searching for a field among the hill tribes, to his despair Arthington Mission who was financially sponsoring him expressed that they can no longer support the work of Pettigrew in Manipur as they no longer plan to work in Manipur (Zeliang, 2005: 19). This situation put Pettigrew in a tight spot but having visited almost every part of Manipur including valley and hill areas, he did not want to give up his work so he requested American Baptist Mission for sponsorship and to his happiness the American Baptist Mission accepted the request and thus he started working under American Baptist Mission (Zeliang, 2005: 23).

In his survey for a field it is said that he went to different part of the hill tribes such as Mao area near the border of Nagaland, Senvon a Kuki village where the village chief denied the permission. So in October 1895 Pettigrew surveyed the Tangkhul areas covering

Ukhrul, Hundung, Khankhui, Kachai, Paoyi, Shiroy etc. The hill people in those days were illiterate and were practicing head hunting with no road connectivity. Reaching these people, communicating and convincing them must have been one of the hardest and riskiest works ever. Basic medicines were of good help to communicate to the people by curing the sick when the tribals were sacrificing fowl to cure the sick. It is said that Mr. Raihao, the then King of Hunphun was foretold by his father and great grandfathers about the coming of the tall white man to Ukhrul. So the fierce head hunter warrior could not reject Pettigrew's request for a piece of land instead granted him enough land. Pettigrew thus started his work at Hungphun, Ukhrul with a new hope on 6 February 1896. The first thing that Pettigrew did was scribble down in his diary about the people he was going to live with.

Ukhrul, a large village situated in the centre of the Tangkhul hill tribe were being left much to their ignorant wills and ways. No census had ever been taken of this tribe. There was no written language, almost every village has its own dialect, and not a soul in the whole tribe knew anything of even the rudiments of education. An old piece of paper was grabbed and look upon as a curiosity. The majority of the people have never left their mountain in fastnesses, even to visit another tribe or the people of the valley. They were completely ignorant of the outside world. The villagers were independent and democratic. Clannishness, the fear of evil spirits, a blind belief in the efficacy of monthly and annual feasts, ignorance, gross superstition, sin- all these held people in thrall (Solo, 2010:83).

Therefore with the coming of the missionary came the western education. Michael (2010) said the greatest benefit of the converted Christians was the education, which was not an exception to the people of Tangkhul. As far as education is concerned to the hill tribes of Manipur, the people of Tangkhul were the first to receive Western education which makes them one of the most progressive tribe. According to Census of India (2011) report, the literacy rate of Manipur State is 79.8 % but the literacy rate of Ukhrul district is 81.08 % which is also higher than most of the other hill districts. This high rate of literacy is attributed to the district being the birth place of

Christianity and Western education in Manipur State which transformed the whole tribe into something they had never foreseen.

Today the people of Tangkhul are almost Christians in total and serve one God called *Varivara*, the God Christianity has given them. For Tylor ('29) it is the monotheistic religion which is the final stage in evolution of religion. It would not be long before the whole population become Christians when all the elders who hold on to their traditional religion passed away. With the coming of Baptist missionary it open up the way for other Christian denominations and the total population of Tangkhul in the present generation are divided into Baptist (65%) Catholics (20 %) Seven Day Adventist (5 %) and non- Christians and others (10%) (Ruivah, '93: 215). Thus with the coming of Christianity it is a new God- one God who is supreme, a God which the people find solace in times of trouble.

CONCLUSION

Morris (2006) quoting the definition given by Southwold wrote that, religion as a social institution is neither a static or unitary phenomenon; but as widespread institution, it is characterized by a number of dimensions, or what Southwold, in his polythetic approach to religion, describes as attributes. These include the following: rituals practices; an ethical code; a body of doctrines, beliefs. Scriptures, or oral traditions; patterns of social relations focus around a ritual congregation, church or moral community; a hierarchy of rituals specialists; a tendency to create a dichotomy between the sacred and profane; and finally, an ethos that gives scope for emotional or mystical experience (Morris, 2006: 2).

For the people of Tangkhul, rituals, worship continues but to a new God, the God of Christian faith. With the coming of Christianity and education the people were suddenly exposed to outside world. There have been changes in almost every aspects of life including their social, political and world view with the people having more or less continuous contact with the outside world and they are not immune from the dynamic changes affecting their traditional way of life.

During the process of conversion, the people were convinced that Christian life is a better life in all spheres and ask the people to completely abandon

their traditional religion, not only the religious aspects but there was a strong propagation to completely destroy and abandon their traditional culture and practices convincing the people that their tradition was a barbaric, uncivilised and primitive, only to realise the uniqueness of their culture down the line by the younger generations. Therefore there is now a conscious effort to revive and preserve their traditional culture but it should not be mistaken with religion. As far as religion is concerned it is Christianity that gave them peace, a new hope and Christianity is so deeply rooted that reviving their traditional religion is not something the present generation can foresee as Ruivah mentioned in his book “*Social Change among Tangkhul Naga*” they however try to retain the original traditional spirit of enjoying the festival by following the traditional way minus animistic rites and rituals” (Ruivah, 1993:79).

The changes though drastic and wide with the coming of Christianity but there are certain continuity with conscious effort to showcase their rich tradition to the outside world. Robinson (2010) said ‘while converts may develop a greater sense of self esteemed, their actual lives are little altered’ (Robinson, 2010: 11). Those traditional festivals which are permitted within Christian faith still find its importance and as long as we can foresee its importance will only grow with the people becoming more aware of their unique culture. We can see this from the fact that in almost every occasions and functions people are asked to wear their traditional dress, perform folk dance called *pheichak* and folk song called *haola*. This is an effort from the young learned one to revive and preserve their culture and not very long from now, their culture and tradition will be revived only to be preserved for future references.

As far as religion is concerned the conversion is rooted so strongly that people have no intention of going back to their traditional religion. The Church besides teaching Bible also acts as an instrument to make people conscious about their social obligations in the society. The belief and commitment never run dry praying in almost everything they do or in almost everywhere they go. The worldview of the people is now from the Christian faith where love, peace, helping hand is the core value of the people. The impact of religion is so strong that the worship and

commitment continues, though there is a change in who they worship, a change from polytheism to monotheism. Luikham ('98) said “every earthly kingdom rises and fall but on this forsaken land which our Creator has cherished so long to glorify the world, the mighty kingdom has been established for eternity in whose honour we at the height of joy which words fail to express” (Luikham, '98: 4). The people now believed that it is a new life, a new creation which was given by the God of Christianity. This is based on the Holy Bible they hold on to, which says “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17) (Bible NIV). Thus the whole process of the coming of Christianity and the conversion according Tylor ('29) is part of development in the religion, a progression from polytheism to monotheism.

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