

Opinion on Religion of the Tangkhul Naga North East India: Continuing Change

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Opinion

Joy (2014) presents an interesting overview of religious change amongst the Tangkhul Naga in North India following the arrival of Christianity. Originally this group had a traditional religion characterised by animism. During the British rule in India and following missionary activity this tribal community embraced Christianity. While their religion today emphasises Christian beliefs they try to retain the original spirit of enjoying the festivals by following the traditional way minus animistic rights and rituals. The advent of Christianity opened them up to the outside world through providing education which brought a massive change in their culture including a dress pattern, speech and behaviour. Joy concludes that the social, political and world view of the group has changed following the advent of Christianity. In spite of changing their faith and embracing a new religion one cannot deny the continuity that persists in the area which is permitted by the new religion. Traditional festivals, symbols and meanings of the nature continue to have an important place in the present Tangkhul Naga tribal community. In fact the importance and awareness of such festivals appears to be increasing and almost on every occasion and function people are asked to wear traditional dress, perform traditional dances and traditional songs called Haola [1]. There is a conscious effort from the young to revive and preserve their culture. Christianity has largely eliminated animistic belief though many aspects of their traditional culture still persist.

It is illustrative to compare the Tangkhul Naga with other north Indian groups that have undergone Christianisation. Sanate 2013 has examined the advent of Christianity and changes in religion amongst the Hamar community following the introduction of Christianity [2]. The Hamar people belong to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of Tibeto-Burman people. They are scattered throughout North East India. Significant changes occurred with the advent of Christian missionaries. The introduction of Christianity in 1910 exercised a profound impact in their traditional tribal society. With the coming of Christianity ritualistic offerings totally disappeared; practices of offering food, meat, etc. to appropriate the spirits of the dead was given up. Christianity brought a new world view to the Hamar people exposing them not only to the Christian nation but also to the international community. They were exposed to new economic systems and structures, political philosophies and forms of government. This completely altered the world's view of this group. Christianity introduced formal education of the Hamar. There was a significant increase in the number of mission schools.

Within a few years of Christianisation many Hamar people embraced a new religion. There was a conflict between converted Christians and ancient traditionalists. The traditionalists blamed the missionaries for undermining their culture and rejecting old values and in contrast the missionaries felt that the culture and traditions of the early Hamar people were not appropriate to Christian forms of living. The newly converted Christians were strongly discouraged to

participate and indulge in any of the festivals and cultural ceremonies. Slowly the importance of Hamar cultural festivals and other social gatherings lost their importance. To date Christmas, of recent origin amongst the Hamar people, has gained a paramount position. However, even today enlightened church leaders see no harm in singing traditional songs and in observing traditional cultural festivals and dances if there are no pagan connotations. In fact, some have argued that Christianity does not have to destroy unnecessarily people's cultural traditions; Christianity grows faster if it flows along with cultural patterns and tradition of the people [3].

Christianity has also influenced healthcare profoundly. In the pre-Christian period healing was characterised by offering sacrifices to evil spirits. Christianity eliminated unhealthy practices and taught people the importance of cleanliness in their everyday lives. They introduced medicines as opposed to spirit healing rituals.

In a third study Joshi Vibha examines Naga history and religion, medicines and politics [4]. She concentrated on the Angami members of the Naga group for analysis. Vibha points out that amongst this group who were very diverse before Christianity. Christianity has not replaced traditional pre-Christian beliefs and practice; however, neither she claims has simple religious syncretism blended the two. She prefers to see Christianity and pre-colonial Naga religion as two broad alternating streams of discourse would circulate in a religious and social fields of the Nagas. For her the relationship between Christianity and pre-Christian local animistic religion is not a simple dichotomy of acceptance or rejection. Rather "the Christian accommodation traditional healing methods is matched by the traditional accommodation of Christian beliefs and practices both of which recognizes and use non-religion scientific medicine". Christianity has been refracted by nature's belief preserving rather than eliminating pre-Christian ideas [5]. In particular relationships to healing she concludes "it is apparent from the above description of various rituals related to health and illness, birth and death, community renewal there has been a continuing mutual adjustment of Christianity and animism. Indeed some Christian converts persist in certain non-Christian rituals while non-Christians (what the Naga call Kruna) have adopted certain customs from their Christians (page 116). Diviners persist and are still prominent despite in the face of Christianity. In conclusion she states Christianity in pre-colonial religious ideas and practice co-exists and interacts along with biomedicine.

To conclude, Christianity does not simply eliminate pagan ideas, rather these often become incorporated into Christian practices. They often co-exist in mutually accommodating relationships.

References

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