

Religion of the Tangkhul Naga in North East India: Continuity and Change

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Abstract

Religion as one of the basic institution in every human society is a system of beliefs usually involving the worship of supernatural forces or beings which continues to have major influence. This paper is an attempt to explain the continuity and change in religion among the Tangkhul Naga tribe in North-East India. The people had a traditional religion which was a belief in the existence of spirits. During the British rule in India, Christianity swept over the entire region and this tribal community had since then embraced Christianity yet the tradition, beliefs system, symbols etc continue to be major part of their culture.

Keywords: Religion; Polytheism; Monotheism; Ha; Kame; *Varivara*

Introduction

The religion of the Tangkhul Naga: continuity and change as a research article is an outcome of an intensive fieldwork among the Tangkhul Naga tribe North-East India. The tribal community which is under study had their own traditional, ancestral religion which was known as *Hao* but the people are now living a converted Christian life and the Tangkhul community now constitutes the major bulk of the population among the hill tribes of Manipur State of India. They occupy the Ukhrul District which constitutes 4409 sq km out of the total 22,356 sq km of Manipur with a population of 183, 115. They are mongoloid stock speaking Tibeto-Burman dialect and the district carves an international boundary with Myanmar (Burma) [1].

During my fieldwork I wanted to find out about every aspects of their traditional religion such as rituals, rites, symbols, the god they worshipped and its influence upon this tribal community. Another important objective of this research was to look into the way Christianity swept across this indigenous tribal community and the process of conversion. Finally, to examine the converted Christian life and see if there is any continuity of their traditional religion after conversion. Therefore, this article is a product of an intensive research among the Tangkhul Naga tribal community who had a drastic change from traditional religion to Christianity

Methodology

This research article is a part of the intensive fieldwork conducted for a period of six months from September 2008 to February 2009 as part and partial fulfillment of the required fieldwork for Ph.D thesis under University of Delhi. Thus, the first authorization and permission comes from the Delhi University, India. The field though terrain and hilly on the border of Myanmar, since I belong to the same tribe, I faced no difficulty in being accepted as their own. The informants were clearly told that their identity will be protected and as such none of their names will figure at any time of my research publication but the rapport established to the level that many of the respondents had no problem figuring their name in any future research publication. The topic of research being on religion, observation played an important role, observing the people in the religious 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. To find out in detail about 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. 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 six months research. From a mere interaction to structured interview was another blend that was used trying to confine to the topic. Thus, observation, interview, and questionnaire played important role for this research. Some other methodology that shaped the whole research includes genealogy, life history and 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 [2] 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 [3] 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 [3].

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According to Sinha [4] 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 [4].

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 [5] 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 [4] 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 external culture. 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 [4]. Therefore religion is a basic social and universal institution.

Discussion

Traditional religion

"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" [6].

Wrote the man in his dairy, who set his foot in hilly terrain Ukhrul for the first time way back in 1896 and who finally changed the whole Tangkhul tribe into a new faith, new life by bringing a new religion to the people. The Tangkhul people were illiterate and had no script. Every village was almost a close entity in itself. Leave about the contact with outside world they hardly had any contact with their neighbouring villages as people hunted head. The villages were organised in such a way that they were friendly neighbours from which they can marry and enemy neighbours from which they hunted head. They had a religion locally known as *Hao*. During my research for the meaning of this religion it was found that there is 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. The people had no idea that they came under Scheduled Tribes as the people were living their own self-sufficient and self-sustenance economy [7].

On the religion of Tangkhul Naga tribe, Hodson 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. The sacrifices are made for the purpose of effecting a cure are dogs, fowls, eggs or pigs. It is perhaps more than a mere coincidence that the omens are taken by means of these creatures.

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, Paoumai, etc who had their own traditional religion. Therefore *Hao* is associated with the hill tribes. But 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*).

The people in those days worship different spirits called *kameo*. Human being has soul but *Kameo* lives in the form of spirits was the belief of Tangkhul Naga. It is not just one spirit but many spirits, in many forms according to different location. The concept of religion given by Tylor [8] seems to fit the people of Tangkhul Naga. He defined religion as "the belief in spiritual beings" and argued that these beliefs exist in all known societies [8]. It is this spiritual beings given by Tylor (1929) which the people of Tangkhul called *kameo* who lives in the form of spirit. According to Tylor [8] religion originated as they belief in soul which is also designated by the term animism (anima means soul). Therefore, animism was the ancient form of religion. He said evolution of religion has passed through the development processes of animism to polytheism and finally to monotheism [8]. *Hao* religion was polytheism in its sense that the spirit (*kameo*) that the people worship were 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. The spirit that lives in the field is called field spirit (*luikameo*), the spirit that lives in the mountain will be called mountain spirit (*Kaphung kameo*), so is the river spirit (*kongkameo*), house spirit (*shim kameo*), etc. Therefore every place 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, offering the best harvest, etc. It was found out during fieldwork that the spirit of those days were not revered rather it was the fear of spirit harming the people that makes them to offer, sacrifice to the spirit. It was the fear of destroying the paddy field, holding hostage of the human soul which makes them to propitiate and offer sacrifices instead of love and reverence. It was this risk of harming in any form that the people could not afford to take.

Frazer [3] 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” [3]. This spirit 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 and for the people of Tangkhul it is this superiority to man’s spirit that controls the human life. Another interesting finding was the concept of God, though the people worship this spirit the concept of supreme being was present from the beginning even to a small tribe like Tangkhul though it was not in concrete term as the first 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” [6].

The supreme god which is not seek after is also called by different name called ‘Kazing Ngalei Kasa Akhava’ –God, the creator of Heaven and Earth, ‘*Varivara*’ ‘Kazingwung’ Ngaleiwung’ Ameowa, etc. The reason why the people could not address this God directly is that ‘HE’ is so great that it was incomprehensible to the mind of the ancestors or call upon His 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 spirits instead of god. The name of the supreme god is seldom taken and is invoked in instances when it is much beyond their control. 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 [9]. *Varivara* remained unclear and less seek after until Christianity brought the concept of Jesus who brought *Varivara* closer to the people. The people had crude ideas of sin and sacrifices of animals such as Indian boar (*seichang*), pig, dog, chicken seems to be sufficient in their estimation to cover many sins [6]. So it is the spirits that people are associated with in their daily and every spheres of life which enveloped the people making them to propitiate and offer sacrifices. Geertz [10] said “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” [10], for the people of Tangkhul the concept of spirit ruling the people, harming and healing was what they were living with. As mentioned above, the numbers of spirits were so many but some of the most important and common ones are given below:

1. Spirit of the house (*Shim Kameo*) who lives in the house and all the offering has to be done to this spirit relating to the family and house. It is hanged in the middle of the main room in a pot covered by a piece of clothes where few feathers are inserted in it as a dress for the spirit.
2. Mountain spirit (*Kaphung Kameo*) the spirit that lives in the mountain.
3. River spirit (*Kong Kameo*) the spirit that lives in the river or any stream.
4. Spirit of the forest (*Khara Ngahong Kameo*).
5. Spirit of sickness (*Kazat Kameo*) the spirit that can make people get sick and can cure them.
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* [11].

With this number of spirits, every festivals and rituals of the people were associated with one or the other spirit. Looking at the number of spirits it is polytheism of E.B. Tylor [8] who said “evolution of religion has passed through the development processes of animism to polytheism and finally to monotheism [8]. It can be said that this very tribal community known as Tangkhul Naga were undergoing a process of evolution in religion where Christianity brought an end to the basic three steps given by E.B.Tylor.

Coming of Christianity

It was in the year of 1896 when an American missionary named William Pettigrew sets his foot in this semi-isolated head hunting tribal community only to bring a sea of change. A change so drastic that missionaries often called ‘darkness to dawn’. With the untiring work of William Pettigrew in the process to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ the people were also taught about reading and writing and it was him who decided to use roman script for this people [12]. Therefore with the coming of the missionary came the western education. Michael [13] Manipur, the people of Tangkhul were the first to receive the Western education which makes the tribe of Tangkhul one of the most progressive tribe. The people are now proud in saying that they are one of the most educated people among the tribes of Manipur with the total population 183,115(2011 Census India). According to Census 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. With the coming of Western education and Christianity the people were suddenly exposed to outside world. What we see now is a conscious effort to revive and preserve their traditional culture but not to 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 festivals by following the traditional way minus animistic rites and rituals” [14]. Today the people of Tangkhul are almost Christians in total and it would not be long before the whole population become Christians when all the elders who hold on to their traditional religion passed away. But with the coming of Baptist missionary, it also open the way for other Christian denominations to come and the total population of Tangkhul in the present generation is divided into Baptist (65%) Catholics (20 %) Seven Day Adventist (5 %) and non- Christians and others (10%) [14].

Continuity and change

The changes though drastic and wide should not be assumed that there is no continuity, rather it is the continuity which has a strong link with the past as Robinson [15] said ‘while converts may develop a greater sense of self esteemed, their actual lives are little altered’ [15]. This makes the society like Tangkhul Naga to have continuity and indigenization of Christian religion which I could not ignore during my research. With the coming of Christianity and education, the people have an exposure to the outside world which brought a massive change in their culture including the dress pattern, speech and behaviour but underneath they are the same people with some attached goals recognizable from within their traditional culture. It is within this culture that people hold on to their traditional values giving them a sense of unity and belongingness which makes them realise the importance of their unique culture. What we see today is the strong continuity in culture which is even increasing but on religious account such continuity is diminishing. Some of the most important continuity ones from the religious aspects are as follows:

Continuity in belief system: The myths and symbols of hao is not something to be followed after converting to Christianity. Except for those who are very religious, one prominent continuity was seen in the belief system. It is a struggle for many individuals with the belief system of the traditional life, in the way they think, the symbols and meaning they conceived are very much influenced by the way of traditional thoughts that signifies the meaning of everything around them which is strictly against the Christian faith.

Continuity in the importance of priest: The priest in the days of yore was called khunwho who played an important role among the Tangkhul society. The priest was feared and respected for the fact that it was the priest who propitiate, who in other sense communicates the *kameo* and the role of priest is ever increasing even with the coming of Christianity and they now called him *yaokahoma* (shepherd).

Continuity in offering: In those days when they were hao, they had to pay a certain portion of their product to the *kameo* giving the best fruit, the best product and after converting to Christianity they pay ten percent of their income to the Church. If any family or individual avoided or pay less than what they ought to, they became the talk of the village. Even if the people had not seen such breaches they believe that the one who is omnipresent can see everything.

Continuity in conflict resolution: When the magnitude of the conflict is high it is the traditional judgement system that they invoke. One example is called *Tara Kajang* which means submersing in the water with the concept that let nature or the mother earth judge them.

Continuity in burial: The Tangkhul people bury the dead since time immemorial by performing different rituals for the deceased

and the people still bury with the ritual performed according to the Christian faith.

Continuity in life after death: The people of Tangkhul believe in the existence of soul which is a part of human body but if anybody die the soul separates from the human body. In the days of yore the soul goes to kazeiram but after converting to Christianity they believed the soul goes to paradise until the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Continuity in festivals and rituals: The Tangkhul Naga today has come a long way from purely agriculturist to embarking modern education system. It was said that during the era of conversion when strong movement of Christianity was sweeping across the Tangkhul hills, some traditional cultures got swept away too as they broke and threw away all that has to do with the tradition. Yet there is a huge continuity blended with the Christian faith to suit the religious framework of the Christianity today.

One strong area of continuity is seen in the festivals which are still celebrated even after converting to Christianity. The whole spirit and concept of festival remains the same with the change in the way religion play its part. Some continuity in festivals are:

- 1) *Luirra*- The seed sowing festival.
- 2) *Yarra*- This is ante-cultivation festival.
- 3) *Mangkhap*- This is a post-trans-plantation festival.
- 4) *Tharreo*- Pre-harvest festival where they plucked the best fruits and brought to the Church for offering.
- 5) *Chumpha*- This is a festival of thanksgiving [16].

In the days of yore all these festivals and rituals would have been associated with propitiation to spirit and drinking of rice beer but this propitiation and offering along with drinking of rice beer is strictly prohibited after converting to Christianity. Ruivah [14] said “they, however, try to retain the original traditional spirit of enjoying the festival by following the traditional way minus animistic rites and rituals” [14]. However some festivals could not be brought forward after converting to Christianity as it has to do with propitiating the spirit and some of such festivals which retains only in the memory of the people are:

- 1) Rakhon kakhon

A ritual of cleaning the pond, and spirit telling them where to cultivate the following year as they practice shifting cultivation.

- 2) Thisham

Ritual of commemoration of the dead, the final rite performed by the family for the dead. It falls around the month of January. On this day the soul of the dead is departed from this world.

- 3) Kashong kahao
- 4) Mawonzai
- 5) Tharshat

All these animistic rituals were supplemented by addition of new Christian festivals which is now playing an important part of their life such as Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, etc.

Apart from all these continuity, there are many areas of continuity such as, village administration, shawl presentation on the occasion of marriage or death, giving the meat share to the in-laws etc, but these

continuity has less importance in the role of religion so their detail account has not been inculcated here. For instance fear of the evil spirit harming them are not completely erased from their belief system. There are many mountains, stones, lakes, streams, trees that the people still think are possessed by the evil spirit and demolishing them or even trespassing will invite dire consequences in the form of sickness or even dead.

Conclusion

It can be clearly concluded that with the coming of Christianity there has been changes in almost every aspects of life including their social, political and world view with the people having more or less continuous contact to the outside world. They are no more immune from dynamic changes of their surroundings. The traditional religion which was known as Hao remained only as folklore for this new educated generation of the Tangkhul community. Morris [17] 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 [17].

For the people of Tangkhul, the change is in the God they worship, which is the vital force of religion but the spirit, the commitment continues to run and religion continues to have the major influence in every sphere of their life.

In spite of changing their faith and embracing new religion, one cannot deny the continuity that persists in the area which is permitted by the new religion. The traditional festivals, symbols and meanings of the nature continue to have an important place in the present Tangkhul Naga tribal community. The importance and awareness of such festivals seems to be increasing as the people realized the uniqueness and importance of their culture. This can be seen from the fact that in almost every occasions and functions people are asked to wear their traditional dress, perform traditional dances called *pheichak* and traditional song called *haola*. This is a conscious effort from the young learned ones to revive and preserve their culture and in the near future their culture and tradition will be revived only to be preserved for future references.

Morris [17] continues to say that Christianity is reputed to be the largest of the world religions and is found, in one form or another, throughout the world. It is estimated that around thirty –two percent of the world population is Christians – around 2 billion people, half of whom are adherents of the Roman Catholics faith. Still an important influence in western Europe and north America, Christianity has always had a strong missionary impetus and since the sixteenth century has spread throughout much of what is now described as the ‘developing world’- Asia, Latin America, Africa and Oceania. Christianity has thus been closely implicated in both the rise and spread of capitalism and in the colonial encounter itself. Although Christianity is claimed as a transcendental truth of universal significance, it has been communicated in diverse historical and socio-cultural context and has thus given rise to a bewildering number of denominations, sects, churches, and movements. Besides the roman catholic church and the eastern orthodox church (which has more than 200 million adherents)

and such established Christian churches as the Anglican, Methodist, Apostolic, Lutheran, and Baptist churches, there exist throughout the world many thousands of different independent Christian churches. With the resurgence of charismatic and Pentecostals form of Christianity, there has been, in recent decades, a huge expansion of Christianity in many parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America – as we shall later note [17].

The impact of Christianity through these western missionaries is seen even to these small terrain North-Eastern hills of India. The Christian faith is rooted so strong that people have no intention of going back to their traditional religion. The people of Tangkhul are infact grateful to the ones who have ushered this new religion and this gratitude is echoed in the line of Luikham [18] who 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” [18]. The Church today, besides teaching Bible also act as an instrument to make people conscious about their social obligations in the society. The beliefs and commitments never run dry, remembering and praying to the converted faith of Christianity in everything they do has now become part of their existence. Thus, the people as god fearing or spirits fearing continue, but to a new God, the God Christianity has given them. The Tangkhul tribal community is now living a converted Christian life which according to Tylor in the process of evolution of religion is the monotheistic religion, a belief in one god, the progression from animism to polytheism.

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