

# **A Critical Enquiry on the Introduction of Christianity and Identity Transformation among the Nagas: With Special Reference to the Ao Nagas**

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## **Abstract**

Religion has always played a crucial role in determining both individual as well as group identity. The conversion of the Nagas to Christianity beginning for the 19<sup>th</sup> century marked a new epoch in the history of the Nagas, witnessing a sea of change in every aspect of their life. This marked the formation of a new identity under the banner of religion. This paper is an attempt to critically examine the possible reasons for the conversion of the Nagas and the Aos in particular from their traditional belief system, often categorized as Animism to Christianity in the light of a new identity formation and structural changes among the Nagas.

**Keywords:** Identity, Religion, Christianity, Animism

## **Introduction**

The history of the precolonial Naga society was marked by seclusion and exclusivity. The Nagas in general did not liked intrusion from the outsiders as such, there was very little interaction with the outside world until the coming of the British and its consequent occupation of the Naga hills. In the word of Hokishe Sema, “The rigid physical isolation and seclusion in which the different Naga tribes lived was not only a result of the peculiar circumstances in which these tribes found themselves, but was also self-induced and deliberately chosen” (1986, p. 8). One can observe that, there was inimical relationship not

only between the different tribes but, even within the villages of the same tribe prior to the establishment of the colonial regime in the Naga hills. The establishment of the British rule in this region brought about a transformation in the Naga society. These changes have both positive and negative implication. nevertheless, it is true that, the coming of the British and the missionaries did open a new era among the Nagas.

## **British intrusion and structural change among the Nagas**

The British at first, had little interest in occupying the hilly tracks as the occupation of these

mountainous terrain with war like barbarous tribes was considered unprofitable. It should be noted that, in all of their policies, the colonial power was driven by profit motive. Yet, keeping the Nagas under their control became somewhat inevitable out of necessity and the prevailing circumstances over the time.

Different factors necessitated the British to establish their power over the Naga Hills of which, the imperialistic and expansionist policy of the Burmese that diverted the attention of the British towards the North Eastern region on the first place was one major reason for triggering their interest. The Burmese by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reconquered Manipur in 1813 and occupied Assam in 1821. Manipuri Raja, Marjit Singh, along with his two brothers fled from Manipur to Cachar, which caused instability in Cachar compelling the Raja of Cachar to entreaty the British for help. Hearing no response from the British, the Raja of Cachar had to turn towards the Burmese: Sensing the danger of Burmese imperialistic policy as a threat to the British controlled area; the British did not hesitate and immediately declared Cachar as a protected state under British which in fact was a clear sign of deviation from its earlier policy of mutual relationship with

the Burmese. In addition, to this, Assam which was under the rule of the Ahom ruler, Raja Chandrakant at the time of Burmese occupation of Assam, was dethroned and later reinstated to the throne when he beseeched the Burmese for help. But later on, he was compelled to seek political protection from the British when, he saw the inhumane act incurred upon his people by the Burmese. on the request of the Ahom ruler of Assam for protection, coupled with the fear of Burmese expansion on the British occupied territories of India, and not forgetting the Russian interest over Asia after the fall of Napoleon all accelerated the British to declare war against the Burmese earlier with whom, they were trying to maintaining obeisance in order to establish commercial relationship without war (Yonuo, 1974, p. 63-67). Thus a war between the two became inevitable.

History has recorded how the first Anglo-Burmese war which started on 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1824 after a fierce battle at all front, finally ended in 1926 after two years of constant war with a peace treaty also known as "Treaty of Yandabo". Between the British and the King of Ava of Burma. The Burmese were brought into submission and area like Assam and Manipur which never were under the dominion of any other

rulers or dynasties all came under the influence of the British. Notwithstanding the relationship maintained between the Ahom's and different Naga tribes prior to the Anglo-Burmese war, which was a concoction of mutual relation and aggression at the same time, the Nagas were not left unaffected by the War. The world of the Nagas and many other tribes like, Garo, Khasis, Lushai etc. living in the mountains and hills adjacent to the Assam and Manipur valley and plains were now exposed to the outside world through the first Anglo-Burmese war. In the word of Piketo Sema, "The treaty had an immense impact on the tribes of North east India with no evidence of any Knowledge of these tribes, the British became the de facto guardian of the whole region by the terms of peace treaty" (1992, p. 1).

The Nagas whose abodes were covered with thick and difficult to access forest areas, accelerated by heavy rainfall and malaria's region of course was not a bed of roses for the British or any other rulers for economic or political control. However, it became a necessity for the British to put a check on these tribes especially the Nagas who continuously raided the British occupied area of Assam and Manipur. Asoso Yonuo remarked, "Whatever might it be like a

thunderbolt from the sky, the British had sooner or later to get themselves involved with the hill tribes particularly the Nagas in order to keep their interest going in Assam, Manipur and Burma" (1974, p. 71).

Interfering in the affairs of the Nagas became inevitable as the interest of the British over their newly occupied territory grow deeper thus specially, with the discovery of tea in the plains of Assam augmented by the fear of Burmese and French whom though defeated in war, still possessed a threat to the British most important occupied colonial states of India (Yonuo, 1947). Thus providing it another reason to take control over the Nagas. It should also be noted that, the British wanted to take control over the Naga Hills for strategic reasons. In this concern, Piketo Sema wrote, "Evidently, the British had been drawn into territory not for any other purpose or attraction, but because of their strategic interest" (1992, p. 4).

The British at first left the matter in the hands of Manipur and Cachar rulers to usurp the war like Nagas, however, they soon realised that they were unable to curb the belligerent Nagas under their control. The first encounter between the British and the Nagas

took place in 1932, on their search for a road connection between Manipur and Assam. This encounter was not a pleasant encounter as the Angami Nagas attacked Captain Jenkin and Pemberton led troops and coolies. Owing to their superior military might, the British indeed could counter the Angami Nagas (Ao, 1970, p. 41-42). However, this incident did not put a stop to the Naga raiding over the British controlled plains of Assam.

Unable to befriend with the Nagas, the British Starting from 1832 took numerous expeditions which was reciprocated with massive retaliations from the Nagas. Properties and lives were lost for both the parties until in 1851, the British inferred the policy of non-intervention in the Naga Hills during the time of Governor General, Lord Dalhousie. Dalhousie in his minute wrote in 1851:

Hereafter, we should confine ourselves to our own ground: protect it as it can and must be protected; not meddle in the feuds or fights of these savages; encourage trade with them as long as they are peaceful towards us; and rigidly exclude them from all communication either to sell what they have got, or to buy what they want if they should become turbulent or troublesome. (Dalhousie, 1851, as

cited in Assam Administration Report, 1885)

The policy of non-intervention having failed to stop the Nagas from raiding, the British finally decided to completely control and administer the Nagas starting from 1866. Curbing the Nagas and keeping them under their control therefore became a better option for the colonial masters in keeping themselves safe from the Naga raids.

Thus, different Naga villages were occupied and annexed one after the other under the British rule. It is important to note that every Naga village irrespective of their tribe, was an independent unit, prior to the coming of the British and therefore, in order to conquer the Nagas and to take control of their land, it was impractical to conquer the whole of Naga Hill hence at once. Rather they were required to conquer every village as an independent sovereign entity.

The consolidation process continued till 1947. One after the other the different Naga tribes came under the control of the British either through warfare or submission without a fight. Starting from the Angami area, the different Naga villages submitted themselves to the British gradually and, in the process of their consolidation; the

Aos were also compelled to express their allegiance to the British rule. Finally, the Ao area was fully annexed to the Naga Hill district of Assam in 1889 and Mokokchung became the head quarter of the Aos (Sema, 1986, p. 14).

The British consolidation and the process of proselytization went hand in hand in the Naga Hills. In the eyes of the British; the precolonial Nagas were savages without law and order therefore, maintaining law and order among these lawless tribes became one of the most important objectives of the British: Converting the Naga into Christianity directly or indirectly became a tool for the British administration. This does not necessarily mean that, the work of the Christian missionaries were just directed to maintaining law and order among the Naga tribes; there were ample of reasons and objectives to which the missionaries directed their interest on the hill tribes nevertheless, for both the British administration and the missionaries' one thing was evident that, maintaining order and stability among the Nagas was a requisite for any further developments to proceed.

The arrival of British and the missionaries to the land not only exposed the unexposed hilly tract to

the outside world but, it brought about changes that would affect the very base on which the Naga society was structured.

The Ao Nagas, prior to the coming of the British and the missionaries practiced Animism. According to the Cambridge dictionary, Animism can best be described as a belief in the existence of soul and spirit in all natural things like rock, forest, trees, which can have influence over the activities of humans. The very nature of Animism as a belief system made their religious life intertwined with secular life thus; making it difficult to study the two separately. In the word of Chandrika Singh:

The ancient Naga people have strong faith in natural forces were, animist by faith. They carried various religious myths, which served as their religious scripture and creeds in absence of any prescribed religion. These religious faiths helped them not only to understand the environment and universe but also to shape their social and cultural life. (2004, p. 8)

It can be observed that the animistic belief system of the Nagas was an important determinant of the social, political, economic, and cultural lives of the Nagas; their ideas on geography, environment and so forth. Against this background, the

British administration and the missionaries during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century brought forth a complete new social order in the Naga Hill district of Assam.

The belief system followed by the Nagas prior to the coming of the British encompasses every aspects of their life as such when the Christian missionaries attempt to introduce Christianity, it meant a complete structural shift. Once a person converts himself into Christianity, he would have to deny his ancestral religion which, as pointed out earlier was not only a religious belief but the root to all other social, political and cultural aspects of the pre-colonial Naga society; changing a person's religion from animism to Christianity therefore was not just identified as having a new identity in Christ but, a convert Christian was compelled to leave his old religion which has all his life activities knotted: tea in placed of rice beer, prayers and singing gospel songs instead of festivals and rituals; mutual love and respect in placed of head hunting, seclusion to inclusion of every individuals under the banner of Christ irrespective of tribe, greed or colour.

In a nutshell the Nagas saw an abrupt transformation in every aspect of their life once they

converted themselves into Christianity. However, it is also true that the introduction of Christianity did not utterly wipe out the entire social cultural and political fabric of the Nagas. The Nagas still endorse great reverence to some of their old customs and tradition which is practiced till date. For example, the governing institution of the villages of the Nagas are still strongly based on the traditional system of governance. The colonial period by and large ushered a new era among the Nagas.

### **Animism to Christianity**

Though proselytization was not the prime move for the colonial masters, yet, they agreed upon the request of the missionaries and supported the missionary activities in the Naga Hills. This was possibly one way to maintain law and order among the Nagas. Things did really work out as; Christianity began to grow gradually among the Nagas. If the intention of the missionaries was to spread the gospel, the British officials by establishing schools further supplemented to this cause. It is worthwhile to know that the Nagas obviously disliked the British whom they would regard as *temesüng nisung* (white man) in Ao and were always suspicious of them. Hence, they disliked the missionaries at first. In the year 1871, when Godhula visited Dekhu

Haimong (Mulong Kimong) for the first time, his intention was challenged and impugned by the villagers. “What do we want of man’s new religion?” “Get him out of the way”, “A spy, doubtless of the company” (Clark, 1907, p. 11). He was assigned a small hut which was well-guarded and the villagers would not go near for two or three days (Clark, 1907, p. 11). Though Godhula himself was Assamese and not a white man, being a subject of the Company alone was enough for the Ao Nagas to be suspicious of him. How then, could the missionaries succeed in converting the Ao Nagas into Christianity? Conversion process was an amalgamation of various factors and one cannot be limited to a particular event or an experience as the reason behind this transformation. However, it is important to examine as to how the process of conversion began.

### **The ground was susceptible to change**

The missionaries despite various difficulties, could sow the seed of the Gospel among the Aos and the Nagas in general. The Ao Nagas like the rest of the Nagas always wanted to live independently. The practice of head-hunting itself was a means to maintain sovereignty over their little villages. In the case of a weaker village, they sought

protection from a stronger village. For instance, Mulong Kimong was under the protection of Chungtia when the American missionary reverend Dr Clark first visited Mulong Kimong. In fact, Chungtia, the foster-parent, played a significant role in giving assurance to the newly converts when they formed a new village known as Mulong Yimsen (Clark, 1907). In such a case, submitting to a more powerful village does not necessarily mean the right to rule over the weaker village; it was a customary practice for the Aos to protect the weaker village from the attack of an enemy village once such an agreement had been made between the two villages. The protected village on the other hand, was required to pay tributes to their protector. Seeking protection from a stronger village itself was a way to maintain their autonomy along with the practice of head-hunting. Head-hunting was an act of protecting one’s village from the enemies’ attacks. Comprehending this as a factor that contributed to the conversion process may seem disconnected. However, a more critical approach to the social condition of the Nagas during the head-hunting times will give us a more vivid picture of how it worked well for the Christian missionaries in their proselytization process. Christianity talks about peace, and

love for one's enemy. Often, when one studies about the pre-colonial Nagas, one is prone to be erroneous about the practice of head-hunting as a symbol of pride and honour, especially, in cases like that of the Ao Nagas, where one would find various motifs with symbolic meanings carved on the main pillar of the house or in their culture attire. These were symbols of pride and honour. Yet the bigger picture is swallowed in this narrative, which is the intention of protecting one's village from the hands of the enemies; this is overshadowed by the image of heroism.

When the Christian missionaries started propagating the idea of peaceful existence, love for enemies like that of their own brother; it was obvious that it would appeal to the attention of those people living in constant fear like the weaker villages; since Christianity seemed to be a light in the darkness. Moreover, head-hunting as discussed was not a child's play for the sake of pride and honour; it was indeed for protection. If Christian missionaries could come with a better solution to remain unharmed even without taking the head of the enemies, the Ao Nagas were obviously open to the new changes that was making its way in their society. In addition, their old belief system demanded a great deal of

sacrifices: the Naga way of life was full of rituals and ceremonies mostly to appease the malicious spirits and sometimes to ask blessings from the benevolent Supreme Being. From the day of birth, an Ao Naga undergoes various ceremonies and rituals till his death. M. M. Clark in her description of the attitude of the Aos towards Sin stated, "The Aos define sin as 'unclean', 'foul', 'a stain', 'a spot', and greatly abhor anything they denominate as sin" (1907, p. 59).

If a woman dies during her childbirth, all her belongings must be destroyed; if a person dies of an unnatural death, his whole family must abandon their house, and live in the outskirts of the village until the next new moon during which, no person can visit or talk with the bereft family for six days. Since nothing of their possession can be taken, they had to survive with the clothing and food provided to them by their relatives which had to be done without communication. Everything related to the old is forsaken: their field, their clothes, cattle, including their house. Therefore, the unfortunate family had to bear the consequences of their sin by giving up all their possessions (Clark, 1907). Such taboos were economically demanding and as such, when the



Christian missionaries preached about Jesus of Nazareth who paid for all the sins of man, unlike their old belief system that demanded a lot of sacrifices, it was most likely more appealing to the Nagas. In the words of M. M. Clark, "Religiously, these hill people South of Assam, not being grounded in the old systematized religions of the East, and having no caste, are far more ready to accept the simple story of Jesus of Nazareth" (1907, p. 59).

### **Democratic practices**

If we look at the governing institution of the pre-colonial Ao Nagas, interestingly their system of governance was democratic in nature. The Ao Naga villages were republic leaning. In the words of Major Butler about the Ao village governing body he elaborated, "Every man follows the dictates of his own will, a form of the purest democracy which is very difficult indeed to conceive as existing for even a day; and yet that it does exist here is an undeniable fact" (Elwin, 1961, p. 525). It was this democratic nature of the AOs that further widened the space for the penetration of Christianity in the land. Taking the example of the first Ao Christian village Mulong Yimsen, it was evident that the high risk for the newly converted Christians led to the formation of a new village some miles away from the old

village Mulong Kimong. They faced contempt and criticism from the members of the old village, but this did not stop them from forming a new village. If contempt and mockery were to be heard, it was out of their concern for the newly converts: living in a time where there was constant threat from the enemy villages. They never expected the newly formed village to sustain by itself even for a week. However, individual decision was respected which is why the first converted Christians could coexist with the unbelievers whom the converted AOs would often term as *yimcha memanger*. This does not necessarily mean that there was always an armistice between the two. The new converts were forbidden by their new faith to participate in their traditional festivals and rituals. However, it was also true that as member of the village they were required to participate in certain traditional practices. Misunderstandings between the two parties was also inevitable. It must also be taken into consideration that, though there was individual liberty, the Ao Nagas would often, after an elaborate discussion, come to a decision that was final and mandatory for all members of the village. However, it is also true that, individuals or groups who could not adhere to the popular decisions were punished

and excommunicated. Yet individual rights were not curtailed and every individual enjoyed maximum freedom as far as individual decisions were concerned. The individuals were still in a safe zone and were less questioned for accepting the new faith. Thus, the very nature of the governing institution of the Ao Nagas itself proved to be suitable for the spread of Christianity.

### **Songs and Christianity**

When the Assamese evangelist Godhula first visited Dekha Haimong, he was put to question by the villagers as a subject of the colonial administration. As mentioned earlier, he was put in a hut and kept under surveillance to ensure their own safety. Mrs. Clark elaborated how the evangelist was left all by himself and no villagers could go near him for the first two or three days. It was his singing that slowly caught the attention of the villagers (Clark, 1907). Mrs. Clark remarked, "But when with his deep-toned, melodious voice he poured out his soul in the sweet gospel hymns in Assamese, the people flocked around him and listened as he told them, in his own eloquent way, the sweet old, old story" (1907, p. 11). The Ao Nagas are known for communicating through songs. Songs had always played a vital role in the life of the Ao Nagas.

Singing accompanied every festival, and lovers would communicate through songs. Songs were a medium of communicating and transmitting their history and tradition. It was indeed the hymns that Godhula sang in Assamese that got the attention of the first converts in Dekha Haimong.

Singing is an important aspect and an integral part of Christianity. Singing accompanies every worship in a Christian religious setting. Therefore, as part of a Christian worship, when the missionaries along with the message of the gospel used songs as a medium of conveying their message, it was easier for the Ao Naga people to connect with the new religion. Though unfamiliar with the meanings, the first Ao converts were eager to learn the English and Assamese hymns and songs taught by the missionaries. Till date, a typical Naga worship service begins with a hymn and ends with a song followed by prayer. In short, song played a significant role in proselytizing the gospel among the Ao Nagas as, it could connect the new with the old.

### **Conclusion**

There are various other factors which exerted great influence in the spread of Christianity such as the introduction of modern medicine

and economic support. Dr Chandrika Singh opines that, one of the factors responsible for the growth of Christianity among the Nagas was by and large, the economic assistance given to them by the mission centres (2008). Assistance in the form of financial help in times of distress, medicines, and so forth, contributed in the spread of Christianity among the Ao Nagas. Like the old saying that goes, “Little drops of water make a mighty ocean”, the unceasing determination and persistent efforts executed by the missionaries altered the course of the Ao Naga history.

However, it should be noted that it was not only the missionaries who single-handedly manage to walk the path that was so challenging. In fact, the British officials were just as instrumental in transforming the Naga society. If the missionaries were injecting the seed of love and prepared the minds of the Nagas,

the British with their heavy hand would compel the Nagas to stop the activities such as head-hunting in the form of law, establishing schools, and protecting the missionaries under their care (Singh, 2008). The ground was prepared by the officials for the missionaries to spread the gospel among the Ao Nagas.

The little light that started to ignite from one of the weakest villages slowly and steadily transferred the light to all the other villages. Once the flame was ignited, in no time the converted Nagas themselves took up the flame and spread the gospel not only among the Aos but even to the other tribes of the Naga Hills. The history of the Naga’s conversion to Christianity is a fascinating tale marked not just by a shift in their religious beliefs and perspectives, but, a total transformation which eventually became the defining mark for both the individual and social identity of the Nagas.

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