

Research Report

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 their own traditional religion which was a belief in the polytheism. During the British rule in India, Christianity swept over the entire region and this tribal community had since embraced Christianity although the tradition, beliefs system, symbols, etc continue to be major part of their culture. The article delineate upon the different types of spirits people worship along with the significance of each spirit which was later abandoned when Western missionaries brought the gospel of Jesus. The article also discussed how Christianity was introduced and conclude by discussing how the people are now consciously making efforts to protect their traditional culture.

Key words: Religion, Polytheism, monotheism, spirits *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 in India for six months. The community under study constitutes the major bulk of the population among the hill tribes of Manipur State, India. They occupy the Ukhrul District which constitutes 4409 sq km out of the total 22,356 sq km of Manipur with total population of 183, 115 (Census India 2011). They are mongoloid stock speaking Tibeto-Burman dialect and the district carves an international boundary with Myanmar (Burma) (Shimray 2007). The Tangkhul people are Christians but not many generations ago, they had their own traditional ancestral religion which was known as *Hao*. The objective of the study was to find the every aspects of their traditional religion including rituals, rites, symbols, and gods or goddesses. The second objective of the study was to look into the way Christianity swept across this indigenous hilly terrain tribal community and the process and stages of conversion. Finally, to examine the converted Christian life and see if there is any continuity of the traditional religion after conversion.

Methodology

The study was undertaken as part of the Ph.D thesis fieldwork. The first authorization and permission to conduct the research fieldwork comes from the Delhi University, India. The people under study were informed about the purpose of the study and due permission was taken from tribal leaders and all the informants stating that their identity will be protected and as such none of their names will figure at any time in my research publication.

On the methodology, observation played an important role. Observing the people in the religious settings, religious festivals, rituals, and their day to day life gives an enormous data about the present Christian life. To study the traditional religion of the yore interview played an important role. There were elders among the tribe who were living a traditional life and are now living a converted Christian life. Interviewing such elders yielded an enormous amount of data on the traditional religion. Interviews included both scheduled and structured interview. Even to a small tribal community like the Tangkhul Naga, literacy and migration has its impact in the present scenario so

administering questionnaire consisting both open-ended and close-ended was an important part research. Other methodology that shaped the research includes genealogy, life history, case study of religious events and mechanical aid such as photography, recorder etc.

Theoretical Framework

Religion as one of the basic institutions (Srivastava 1997) 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 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 differed 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 1932: 224). According to Sinha (1977), religion is a subject of great concern even in an advanced society of today where the 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 (Sinha1977:11). Weber (1922) 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 Tangkhul people would have been easier if it was from the present Christian faith but to define it from the traditional religion was a challenge. There was no god; there was no name to their religion, although there were spirits which vary from village to village. Sinha (1977) 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, with limited external influenced until Western missionaries penetrated this hilly terrain tribal population. According to Sinha, 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 1977: 6).

Result and 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” (Solo 2010: 83). Wrote the man in his dairy, who set his foot in hilly terrain Ukhrul for the first time way back in 1896 and finally changed them into a new faith, new life by bringing a new religion.

The Tangkhul people were illiterate and had no written script. Every village was almost a closed entity in itself let alone about the contact with outside world, they hardly had any contact with their neighbouring villages too. Any strangers they met were beheaded which was popularly known as head hunting culture (Ruivah; 1993). They had a religion locally known as *Hao* which was not the name of the religion in itself rather *Hao* was an external term given Kings of Meitei who live in the plain of the State Manipur (India) (Zeliang 2005). On the religion of Tangkhul Naga tribe, Hodson (1989) 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 from 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 1989: 136).

The sacrifices 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 (Hodson 1989:137). *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. With the coming of Christianity the term *Hao* has come to use for those who practice their traditional religion and called them as *haomi* (People of *Hao*). The Tangkhul people in the days of yore, worship different spirits called *kameo*. It is believed that human being has soul but *Kameo* lives in the form of spirits. The spirit is not just one but many, in different forms according to different geographical space. The concept of religion given by E.B Tylor (1929) 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 (Tylor 1929:424). It is this spiritual beings given by Tylor (1929) which the people of Tangkhul called *kameo* who lives in the form of spirits.

According to Tylor (1929) 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 (Tylor 1929: 424). *Hao* religion was polytheism in its sense that the spirits (*kameo*) people worship was many. The name of the spirit is associated with the place; it is not the name of the spirit that is associated with the geographical space rather the spirit is named after the place. Eg. The spirit that lives in the field is 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.

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 witnessed *Hao* and are now living a converted Christian life recollect those days as days of offering, killing, propitiation etc taking away the best domesticated animal, offering the biggest animal, 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 the people propitiate and offer sacrifices instead of love and reverence. It was this risk of harming the people in different form that the people could not afford to take.

Sir James Frazer (1932) 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 1932:222). 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” (Solo 2010:39).

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 (Zimik 2003: 14). *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 (Solo 2010: 45).

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 (1996) 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” (Geertz 1996: 4), 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* (Rimai 1978).

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 (1929) who said “evolution of religion has passed through the development processes of animism to polytheism and finally to monotheism (Tylor 1929:424). 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 (Imchen 2002)

Therefore with the coming of the missionary came the western education. Michael (2010) wrote, that among the tribes of 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 among the most educated 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 except Churachandpur. This high rate of literacy is attributed to the coming of Christianity. Through the coming of Western education and Christianity and exposure to the outside world with the preaching of missionaries the people realised that Christian living was better in every spheres of life.

It is said that, the people were asked 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 saying that their tradition was a barbaric, uncivilised and primitive, only to realise the uniqueness of their culture by the present literate generation down the ages. What we see now is a conscious effort to revive and preserve their traditional culture but this revival is restricted to culture and tradition and not the traditional religion. As far as religion is concerned, it is Christianity that gave them peace, 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" (Ruivah 1993: 79).

Today, the people of Tangkhul 99 percent Christians 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%) (Ruivah 1993: 215).

Continuity and Change

The changes though drastic and wide, should not be assumed to be without continuity, rather it is the continuity which has a strong link with the past as Robinson (2010) said 'while converts may develop a greater sense of self esteemed, their actual lives are little altered' (Robinson 2010: 11). This makes the society like Tangkhul Naga to have continuity and indigenization of Christianity which could not ignored during my research. The people with the coming of education and exposure to the outside world now dress up their speech and behaviour in the clothes of Christian life but underneath they are the same people with some attached goals fully 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, making them to realise the importance of their unique culture.

The continuity in culture is strong and even getting stronger but there is diminishing continuity on the religious perspective. Some of the most important continuity ones from the religious aspects are as follows:

1) Continuity in belief system

The myths and symbols of *hao* is not something to be followed after converting to Christianity but except for the religious Christians, it is a struggle with the signs and symbols that revolves around their world view.

2) Position of Priest and Pastor

The priest in the days of yore was called *khunong* 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, communicates to the *kameo* and the role of priest is ever increasing even with the coming of Christianity and they now called him *yaokahoma* (shepherd) or the Pastor.

3) Continuity in offering

During the traditional times, 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.

4) 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.

5) 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.

6) 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.

7) 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 try to completely abandon 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.

Some other continuations are 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.

- 1) *Luir*- 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) *Chumph*- This is a festival of thanksgiving (Khamuiwo 1999).

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 (1993) said “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). 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*

The people had to fetch water from stream or pond. There is a particular stream the village had earmark for drinking water and the villagers had to clean them once in a year. This ritual of cleaning the water source is called *Rakhon kakhon*.

2) *Thisham*

It is the ritual of commemoration of the dead, the final rite performed by near and dear ones 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 this 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 believed are still 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 have been changes in almost every aspects of life including their social, political, and world view, as the people now have more or less continuous contact with the outside world. They are no longer immune from dynamic changes in their surroundings. The traditional religion, which was known as *Hao*, remains only as folklore for the present younger generation of the Tangkhul community.

Morris (2006) wrote that religion as a social institution is neither a static nor unitary phenomenon; but as a 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, belief. 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 the profane; and finally, an ethos that gives scope for emotional or mystical experience (Morris, 2006, pp: 2).

For the people of Tangkhul, the change is in the God they worship, which is the vital force of a religion. But the spirit of commitment to the worship persists and religion continues to be the major influence in every sphere of their lives. In spite of

changing their faith and embracing a new religion, one cannot deny the continuity that persists in the cultural areas which is permitted by the new religion. The traditional festivals, symbols, and meanings of nature continue to have an important place in the present Tangkhul Naga tribal community. The importance and awareness of such festivals are increasing as the people realize the uniqueness and importance of their culture. This can be seen from the festivals as the people are asked to wear their traditional dresses and perform folk dance called *pheichak* and folk song called *haola*. This is a conscious effort by the young learned ones to revive and preserve their culture and in the near future their culture and tradition will be revived and preserved for future reference.

As Morris (2006) said that Christianity is reputed to be the largest of the world religions and it is found, in one form or another, throughout the world, the impact of Christianity among this hilly terrain tribal community has brought a sea of change. The Christian faith is rooted so strong that there is 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 (1998) 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” (Luikham 1998:4). 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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