

The Impact of Christianity and Cultural Traditions of Ao-Naga Tribe in Nagaland

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Abstract

The rise of ‘colonial modernity’ in the beginning of the 19th century initiated the process of change and transformation of the many traditions of northeast India. The ‘colonial modernity’ has been traditionally seen as an ideology in late nineteenth century Europeans institutionalized colonial domination in the name of missionary education, medical facilities, establishing infrastructure facilities etc., for the colonial countries. They advocated ‘colonial modernity’ as a way of promoting good government. However, the concept of ‘modernity’ has been resisted and questioned in multiple forms by the local communities. In this context this paper is an attempt to assess the impact of Christianity on the cultural past of the Ao-Naga tribe of Nagaland. It can be argued that various socio-cultural traditions of the Ao-Nagas have been changed due to intervention of Christian Missionaries in Nagaland.

Key Words: Traditions, Missionaries, Colonialism, Belief System

Introduction

The ‘colonial modernity’ has been traditionally seen as an ideology in academic discourse. This ideology helped the Europeans for consolidation of their hegemony over colonized countries. But it has been resisted and questioned in multiple forms by the oriental communities. In this context this paper is an attempt to assess the impact of Christianity on the cultural past of the Ao-Naga tribe of Nagaland. It can be understood that various socio-cultural traditions of the Ao-Nagas have been changed due to intervention of Christian Missionaries in Nagaland. It is quite different at present because of the changes that are taking place around them. Many people find it difficult to hold or accommodate the concept of ‘culture’ as they have misunderstood the value of their striking culture during the time of change from the traditional values to Christianity.

Background of the Christianity

The Nagas are extremely superstitious and independent in their religious pre-disposition. It was therefore most difficult for the missionaries to tame the untamed Nagas easily.¹ In the eyes of the Christian religion, any culture or society, both modern and ancient are seen as under darkness or under devil's government and any un-Christianized country is termed unsaved, unreached and devoid of the knowledge of the truth. The Christian world view is, in Christ there is life; and light and truth. So, however scientific and technically advanced a country may be, they are considered as in darkness where the Gospel of salvation is yet to be preached.² From such a viewpoint, the Ao-Naga country was under darkness as any other people outside the knowledge of the truth.

Mary. M. Clark wrote, "Mine album is the savage breast, where darkness broods and tempests rest without one ray of light; To write the name of Jesus there, And point to worlds all bright and fair, And see the savage bow in prayer, Is my supreme delight."³

In the letter from Clark, Sibsagar, December 5th 1871, he wrote, ".....a few words about these savages of hills. They are men of blood and war. Their fighting is all hand to hand, with big knives and spear. With them it is no glory to a non-combatant or a slave. But as our Indians prized a scalp, so these men glory in the head of warrior; and as, among some of the tribes, a man is hardly considered a man till he has taken human life, so they are not always very particular whether the man they kill is an enemy or not, provided, if not an enemy, it is done secretly."⁴

The most terrible thing in Ao-Naga region prior to the coming of Christianity was continual warfare and even more dreadful, inter-village disputes among the Ao-Nagas. Haimendorf wrote, drinking of rice beer was common and it was one of the most important food items used by the Nagas.⁵ He further states that "to the Aos a feast without rice beer is unthinkable..."⁶. When the American Baptist Missionary came to the Ao-Naga region, they prohibited from drinking rice beer. From their observation the missionaries' believed that the excessive use of rice beer rendered the Nagas lazier or disinclined to work. The Naga men in particular created problems in the family after they got drunk.⁷ Thus the missionaries taught Ao-Nagas that abstinence from drinking of rice beer is an outward sign of a Christian life. The missionaries persistently taught that a drinker of rice beer would be in hell fire forever.⁸

The first missionary to the Nagas was Brownson who established the mission on 13 March 1840 at Namsang in the Tirap frontier Division.⁹ The first Naga convert was Hube Konyak and the second was an Ao, Longjanglepzuk of Merangkong village who was baptized by S.W. Whiting on September 7, 1851 at Sibsagar. Dr. Clark encountered the colorful Nagas who came from their mountainous abode to the plains of Assam to barter. Attracted by their openness, friendliness and hospitality, and despite their

uncompromising attitudes for head hunting, Dr. Clark made friends with these hills men. Godhula Brown, an Assamese evangelist was working in the printing press with Dr. Clark at Sibsagar. He made a strong relationship with an Ao-Naga called Supongmeren from Dekhahaimong (Molongyimchen) village. Dr. Clark with Godhula and another member of the Sibsagar church visited Dekhahaimong village in Nagaland on 18 December 1872 and 15 men were baptized on 23 December 1872¹⁰, and they opened a Baptist Mission Center at Molungyimchen village. However, as the number of converts grew, there came about the question of the observance of the local religious customs and rituals etc. and the village was bitterly divided on the question of religion. So, Dr Clark founded a new Christian village called Molungyimsen. This village contained the converts from Molungyimchen as well as a few families from Merangkong village, a few miles away from Molungyimchen, the original village. As soon as the entire Ao area was brought under the British administration, Impur the headquarters of the Ao-Naga was thus established as mission centre in October 1894. From this centre, the Gospel spread to the other tribes.

Despite of their strong animistic belief system, the Christian missionaries could easily convinced and convert the Ao-Nagas to Christianity. The reason was that, as mentioned earlier the life of an Ao-Naga was full of superstitions and fear. Moreover the process of the propitiation of spirits was too costly. The ancient Ao-Naga religion was rather very costly as they used to spend over more than two to three months in festivity and ritual functions a year. During such period, no productive work was performed because it was restricted to go to the fields during such occasions. Against such a background, the Christian message of freedom from fear, superstitions and above all from fearful spirits did appeal strongly to the Ao-Naga minds. The second reason was that the religion of the Nagas was nothing more than heathenism which was the religion of ignorant. The Nagas were told that there is a true God and they must worship and acknowledge this true God. They must give up all their barbaric characters like that of drinking wine, stealing, superstitious believe and headhunting etc. Instead, they must love one another and must enroll themselves as followers of Christ. The Ao-Nagas are god fearing and believe that *Meyitsungba*, the god of death would judge the people after death to allocate hell or heaven depend upon their deeds. Such spiritual threats existing in the religious thoughts of the Ao-Nagas made them to embrace a new religion Christianity which also distributed similar religious message that would bind the god and people together. Inability to bear the cost of expiations in ritual centered Ao-animistic religion, they could easily adapt to Christianity. The most effective way of attracting the simple villagers to Christianity was by telling them about Hell-fire. All persons who were not Christians would be burnt forever in an undying fire after their death. It was thus safer to become a Christian in order to secure oneself from dangers of Hell-fire.¹¹ All Christians firmly believed that the non-Christians were doomed to this terrible fate, and the non-

Christian brothers were naturally inclined to think that there may be something in it. In order to feed them with the Gospel message and to strengthen the new converts, the Baptist missionaries engaged themselves in the translation of the Bible into the local languages.¹² The Ao-Nagas embraced Christianity by giving up their old ways and significantly altered their lifestyle because they were amazed by the prestige of the white men.¹³ Naga scholar Panger Imchen observes that, when Clark an American Baptist missionary visited Mangmetong village of the Ao-Naga tribe in 1904, women and children touched even his urine and saliva curious to feel what it would be like.¹⁴ Such kind of curiosity and simplicity in their thinking about missionaries made the Ao-Nagas embraced Christianity and accept all the changes introduced to them.

Things began to change with the mass conversions resulting in confusion, divisions and disunity. When this new religion was accepted by the Ao-Nagas and their neighboring states, everything began to move towards the light of the Gospel which resulted in both a positive as well as a destructive effect on their old cultural inheritance.

Christianity as a tool of ‘Modernity’ and its impact on Socio-Cultural Traditions

It is accepted phenomenon that Christianity is the main agent of change in Ao-Naga society. With the coming of Christianity into the Ao country, the socio-cultural aspect of the Ao-Nagas has changed.¹⁵ The natives converted to Christianity were expected to stop their old ways of life, ritual practices, sacrifices and celebrations of various kinds etc. These were slowly removed from the societies by embracing Christianity. The animistic practices such as feast of merit, worship of *Lichaba* and different *Tsungrems* (gods), various sacrifices to propitiate the spirits and the use of rice beer, and even the most beautiful traditional institutions like *Ariju* and *Tsuki* system have already disappeared. These were changed with new practices acceptable to Christian norms of life. As a result of embracing Christianity there were changes in their culture, the Ao-Nagas apparently developed a negative attitude towards their own culture.¹⁶ When a new philosophy of life is introduced to a foreign culture, if the new philosophy of life is to work then both negative and positive changes have to take place.¹⁷ When the Christianity was brought to the Ao-Nagas and began to work for better future, reactions, acceptance, submission, rejection division and change were daily experiences throughout the Ao society. The factors that reportedly influenced the American Baptist Missionary work in the area were the extension of the British rule in the neighbouring areas, the nature of the tribals and their ready response to the Christian message, Dr. Clark’s role as the mission strategist and the moments of revival. Christian converts educated in missionary schools were financially well placed as they got jobs and status. Among the Ao- Nagas, the conversion was mainly due to the expectation of miraculous results and the fear of hell fire.¹⁸ In fact, the fear of hell fire troubled most of the non-Christian Nagas, and many Nagas continued to follow their traditional faith throughout their life and convert to Christianity in old age

to avoid burning in the hell fire.¹⁹ The fear of hell fire thus made many Nagas to embrace Christianity. Till the end of the 19th Century the great mass of the Nagas were still faithful to the religion of their forefathers. But today, Christianity is an important factor in the life of the Naga tribes, with 99% of the population having become Christian.²⁰

According to F.S. Downs “This new order ushered in a period of tremendous change. The main agent of change was the government itself. Christianity provided the means whereby the people of the region were able to accommodate themselves to the new world brought by the British”.²¹

As the American missionaries were entering the land, they were preparing the way for the gospel by bringing the Nagas under their rule. The Gospel was first preached at Molungyimchen and that was the beginning of change from old faith, culture to the new culture. One of the reasons the British Government officials did not interfere with the missionaries was that they were all Christians and equally interested in potential Christianization. The British Administration supported Christian missionary activity even though it differed in its approach to preserve Naga culture. For instance, the British officials started extending financial aids to mission schools; however, they restricted the financial aid to those students who remained unchanged in their dress and cultural behaviour. The changes that were brought to the Nagas by the British Administration and the missionaries, even though from different perspective, were perceived by most of the Nagas to be two sides of the same coin. Christianity and education go hand and hand. Without schools, church-planting would be almost a failure in Ao country.

Many Naga scholars have given different views on Naga Identity and Christianity. According to Hokishe Sema, Christianity affected the cultural identity of the Nagas. He points out that the control Christian missionaries imposed, such as not to participate in any rites and rituals connected with traditional religion, created divisions within the community. When the whole village has to observed community rites, non-Christians expect everyone to participate, but the missionaries prohibited the Christians from participating in such religious rites.²² With much regret, he pointed out some of the serious cultural setbacks caused by the Christian missionaries.

Another Naga sociologist, M. Horam, also made a very significant statement on the American Baptist missionaries. He states that “the missionaries have been the offenders in suppressing Naga culture as it finds expression in their hunting songs and their energetic and colourful dances...forbidding dancing and drinking of even the mildest rice beer led to many villages splitting up into two.”²³ Even Alemchiba observes, the Christian missionaries felt every ceremony should be abolished....the tendency was to abolish immediately the old things and substitute individualism for the strong community

feeling and expression of communal identity...the result was conflict of culture. However Sevillie Iralu, writes, "If Christianity had not come to Nagaland things would be entirely different. Life, individual and collectively, would be different...missionary not only preached the gospel but taught hygiene, temperance from heavy drink and chewing bettle nut. This brought a more clean life, more meaningful life longevity".²⁴ Another Naga, E.T. Sunep, also greatly appreciated the American Baptist missionaries' contribution of western education and literacy to the Nagas²⁵. According to Panger Imchen, "the changes and progress made by the Gospel to the Aos is tremendous on an individual, social and religious level. They found their old faith was not the ultimate goal in search for truth....gospel was the basic progress and enlightenment...minds were transformed...evidently with the gospel family, individual and community life had become different. They never wanted to go back to their former way of life."²⁶

Whatever criticism maybe that the missionaries weakened the Naga identity from its traditional foundation, consciousness of missionaries shortcoming should not be undermine acknowledgement of the many positive changes brought by the missionaries, including replacing inter-village warfare with love, unity, education, hygiene and modern medicine. However, it should be admitted that missionaries had some weaknesses. They thought every ancient culture was devilish with no exception. This was due to their inability to study the meaning and value system behind the Ao-Naga cultural behaviour. This led to undermining of cultural features of Ao- Naga society.

The reasons for attempts to abolish those ancient cultural features were made on the grounds that most of them were connected with old religious practices. For instance, to celebrate *Moatsu* by a Christian in those early stages was to go back to their old way of life. They were premature in judgment of good from bad, and on the other hand, missionaries were unable to differentiate between what was to be abolished and what was to be retained, because there was no difference between sacred and irreligious for the Ao-Nagas. Both the foreign missionaries and the natives could not examine deeply what was actually connected with the old practices and what were customary and a traditional part of life. Therefore, even before the missionaries left the country in 1955, there seems to have been a tendency among Christians to think that anything that was western was good and anything Ao satanic. This attitude resulted in danger of total rejection of all Ao-Naga culture and a copying of western culture in the name of Christianity.

Undermining and ignoring the prevailing cultural and religious features of a particular type of society may lead to develop a destructive impact of a far reaching nature. Christianity and missionaries activities, Modern education and development have brought tremendous and an apparent new cultural situation among the Ao-Nagas. But

‘civilization’ is not a mechanical thing that necessarily comes from abroad. In fact, forcing of inducing an imported set of values and ceremonies is apt to result in the decline of one’s cultural system with a consequent weakening of its morality, self-respect, self-determination and self-development.²⁷ This has been the lamentable situation as far as Ao-Nagas are concerned.

The changes that have taken place among the Ao-Nagas highlight the danger of deserting one set of cultural and religious values by jumping too fast into imported western culture without critical analysis, study and reflection. Such has threatened family norms, social ethics and culture- religious meaning in the name of modernization. This sudden change from the old ways of life to the new has resulted in a decline in the qualitative Ao-Naga way of life and has produced an uncertainty of future for many.

Christianity as a case of transformation and development had various consequences. It became a force, which had positive as well as negative aspects.²⁸ Examples of its positive aspects were control of head hunting, tribal village wars and administrative control. An important example of its negative aspects was the disturbance of the traditional tribal social aspects of corporation and cohesion in the villages, within the respective tribes, which was largely based on the rituals of their age-old religion. As most Ao-Naga social practices and customs were based largely on religious beliefs and rituals, their disappearance can be described as having demoralized Ao-Naga communal life. Whatever religious practices, rituals and custom the forefathers had are mostly gone with the coming of Christianity.²⁹ As religion played a strong role in all ceremonies of the Ao-Nagas, and as that religion was not Christianity, the Christian missionaries felt that every ceremony should be abolished. Ceremonies like the ‘Feast of Merit’ had been totally abolished among the converts. Since Christianity remained to be a force in total opposition to what the old religion and practices stood for, many elements of the cultural institution of the tribals gradually faded away. This contemporarily explains for the internal dilemma of cultural expression of the Ao-Nagas, of projecting themselves as a people, considering that cultural elements by continuation and practice provide a sense of identity to the people.

Christianity had its impact on the Ao-Naga society in various dimensions. The Christian missionaries made the deepest impact on the Naga society since they were most closely in contact with the people. In fact, the forerunners of change in the beliefs and ways of the Ao-Nagas were the missionaries and not the administrators. However, while the Christian missionaries made great impact on the Naga society, they were also responsible for the disappearance of many aspects of Naga culture and tradition. The missionaries had scant understanding of the Naga culture and traditions. They acted against the Naga culture and traditions as totally undesirable. They caused immense

damage to the tribal culture, and many institutions received deathblows at their hands. The disappearance of the young men's house or *morung* is due to the fact that from the very beginning, the missions frowned on these as dens of vice where singing, dancing, drinking and sex were the only preoccupations.³⁰ Due to its disappearance, the Ao-Nagas suffered immense social, cultural and architectural loss. Naga folk music, folk-lore, folk-dance, festivals and many other social activities were considered to be part of the animistic society and purposely undermined.³¹

The missionaries lacked the capacity to differentiate between animism and culture. They mixed together animistic beliefs and aspects of culture, resulting almost in the extinction of some unique aspects of Naga culture. The Baptist missionaries, like missionaries throughout the world were in the habit of translating the animist gods into English as 'satan'. This has been done in the case of the Ao-Nagas also. It however, needs mention that many animist gods are far from having the qualities of satan, and rather than being malicious, are definitely benevolent.

Taboos and *gennas* were common features of all traditional religions, including that of the Nagas. Sabbath replaced *gennas*. The old food taboos were substituted by prohibition. The issue involved total rejection of a culture. According to W. C. Smith, a former member of the American Baptist Mission in Ao area, there was entirely too much negation, too much taboo and too little positive.

According to Hokeshi Sema, "whatever religion the Naga tribe may adopt, or whichever Christian denomination they may follow, they should never forget or neglect their social and cultural heritage, Their identity as a distinct tribe can contribute and enrich the great multi-racial and multi-cultural family of India".³² Most of the Ao-Naga Christian has retained their villages and mode of cultivation; their economic interests and activities are the same as those of their forefather. They toil for their daily subsistence and they rely on the same technology, skill and aptitudes. They maintain their traditional way of cultivation; they plough the fields and build their houses, cut down forest trees for slash-and-burn cultivation. They still go hunting, fishing and hold village councils.³³

The Ao-Naga traditional spirituality persisted in many forms even after they became Christian. For instance, while praying for a sick person, a person would move his or her arm and walk around the house chasing the spirit of sickness away. Similarly, if a big tree had to be cut down, a religious person would normally be invited to say a prayer asking permission from the spirit of the tree. In the same way, a prayer is said before hunting or fishing trip invoking God's permission to harvest animals or fish for their livelihood.³⁴ In addition, special prayers are held before the clearing of land for cultivation, sowing seeds, harvesting etc. almost all the agricultural rites and rituals that

were practiced in traditional Ao-Naga religion have persisted, consciously or unconsciously. Likewise, the observance of Sunday as a rest day by the Christian is observed with the traditional religious understanding of gennas, prohibitions of work and requirement of complete rest. Even the observance of the Christmas feast continues in the pattern of the Ao-Naga traditional religious practice of *mithun* sacrifice. The *mithun* sacrifice includes a series of feast involving huge expenses, hosted by a rich family for all the villagers. The woodcarving that signifies the family hosting a *mithun* sacrifice is preserved in many Christian homes as equivalent to the Christian symbol of the cross. Christmas are observed both in the traditional and western modes. Though brewing rice-beer has declined, rice-beer is consumed by many even by Christians though their churches prohibit them from drinking.³⁵

As stated earlier, the Ao-Nagas attributed disease, sickness and death to spirits and toward them off such they made sacrifices. Even today, in spite of church obligations, the Ao-Nagas think that sickness and death are cause by evil spirits. Christians too believe in evil spirit and now they approach their new God to remove the ill intentions of the evil spirits. They also believe that sickness and death are due to the sins committed by the people concerned by the family and in order to be forgiven their sins they offer prayers and go to the priests/pastors to pray to their God on their behalf. To the ordinary nominal Christians, the nature of belief and offering of prayers do not make much difference, and to many it is just a shift from one form to another.

In the past, the Ao-Naga used to celebrate and perform a number of festivals and ritual ceremonies but except *Moatsu* and *Tsungrem mong*, the rest of the ceremonies and festivals have disappeared.³⁶ The practice of traditional paucity clothing like, wearing of *Langtem* (a piece of woven cloth that hangs around the lower limb as a covering of the body) was a way of Ao-Naga dress, but it is not adequate in today's world and were replaced by the modern clothing, another *Teptsu* (tattoo) marking on women's legs as well as the chin as a means of beautification were completely stopped, head hunting was the greatest honour a man could achieve in pre-Christian culture. Head hunters have been condemned by the Gospel and the greatest contribution of western culture to the Nagas was the eradication of this practice. Feast of merit was not only a social occasion but the highest form of sacrifice to god. The whole purpose of this feast was connected with superstition, genna, religious purification and offerings of sacrifice that ended in the highest performance of worship. While in the old faith this was the best form of sacrifice to god, but this is not practice today. *Lepchung* practices among the Ao-Nagas were changed, before Christianity the Ao-Nagas used to keep the dead at home for six days with all kinds of rituals to be performed. Then the body was taken to the graveyard and kept on a raised platform so as to observe his *leptsu*, falling from platform to observe whether the dead had lived an upright or a crooked life. As well, the practice was very

unhygienic and expensive. This practice has already been discarded even among the non-believers influenced by believers. This was a great contribution of the Christian. The Ao-Nagas have learned to bury their dead with Christian rituals. The disappearance of all these have altered the entire dimension of their socio-cultural aspects with replacement by Christian culture. In spite of varied changes in the Ao-Naga society, the old principle of marriage system still exists. One of the ancient Ao cultural practices that have not been change even with the coming of the Christianity is the strong setup system of marriage laws and procedures and its impact on individual and communal ethical values upon which the structure of the Ao society was built.³⁷ Like, the practice of *anuk-apang* (engagement of ushers), and also distribution and sharing of meat according to their based on custom.

Even after the coming of Christianity the Ao-Naga traditional belief system continues, once they know that the person is no more, they will immediately gather in the house of the deceased person and continue singing and praying in favour of the soul of the deceased person and their family.³⁸ In fact, every funeral day of an Ao-Naga is a big gathering. They contribute either in terms of cash or in kind to the bereaved family. On the funeral day, some people still speak to the dead body directly; address to it, even by certain ordained church leaders. This is a combination of both Christian and traditional practices found in modern Ao-Naga society. In the past, they mourned for six days on the dead of a man and five days for a woman. They used to served a piece of food to the spirit of the dead person, during which the visit of eagle, flying over the house of the dead person. The visit of eagle was considered as the visit of the spirit of the dead person to the living ones at home. However, it has been reduced to three days at present and no food is served to the dead person. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of an eagle's visit is still noticed just before and after the dead of a person.

F.S. Downs argued that Christianity is the source of the "creation of tribal identities,"³⁹ however, requires more investigation especially when missionaries are accused of destroying Naga culture. Even though Christianity has enhanced Naga identity, the primary source that has shaped Naga identity has been the Naga traditional culture. Downs is of the view that it is Christianity that helps the Nagas to redefine the identity, especially through education, but Christianity did not create Naga identity. The traditional Naga identity existed even before the advent of the missionaries and could have survived even without any missionary influence.

Conclusion

Of late the scholars from the Nagas critically questioned the paradox nature of the Christian leaders of Nagaland. They argued that “ironically, most Christian leaders in Nagaland still think that the entire socio-cultural changes brought by Christianity and Christian missionaries are positive changes. They use some phrases like “from darkness to light”, “from head hunters to soul hunters” and “from primitive to civilized” etc in order to justify the colonial modernity in Nagaland. It is also mentioned that the converted Christians believe that the most important obligation of a good Christian is to stick on strictly to the doctrine of the Christian faith as promulgated by western Christian, which was the view promoted by the Christian missionaries, repeated the clear distinction between the pre-Christian era and the Christian era, and in that way reminds the society and the people that the Naga lived in darkness before they were introduced to the “light” of Christianity.⁴⁰ These groups of Christian church leaders are still sufferers of the western colonial rule and viewpoint and cannot make a distinction between the gospel and culture.

However, it is accepted opinion among the Ao-Naga society that there was execrable destruction to valuable tradition, customs and moral values of Ao-Nagas due to the emergence of Christianity. The change in Ao-Naga culture inevitably led to downplaying of various traditional practices, like celebration of traditional festivals and feasts, traditional *Ariju and Tsuki* system, ritual practices etc.

In the recent phenomenon new thought process has started among the people of Ao-Nagas due the efforts of intellectual community. As result the importance and awareness of cultural tradition and festivals seems to be increasing. The people have realized the uniqueness and importance of their culture. This can be seen from the fact that they are asked to wear their traditional dress and perform traditional dance and songs in almost every occasions and functions. The very aspects of Ao-Naga attire are now held centre stage in almost all public celebrations.

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