

RESEARCH ARTICLE



The Historiographical Challenges Confronting Naga Christian Tribals Today

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Abstract

Recently, the Naga scholars wrote their own stories using the stories written by the outsiders, quoting as though all of the stories were true. In doing so, they emulated their colonizers, and the latter's half-truths further created a dilemma for the Naga people. Unless they tell their own stories, their stories will still be hidden and their traditional and cultural values cannot be restored. The coming of Western education and the Christian faith brought about tremendous changes in the Naga way of life and belief systems. This has also resulted in a drastic shift in the socio-cultural system. Modern education improves livelihood and health status. The spread of Christianity in Nagaland has both positive and negative impacts on Naga society. The changes are observed in the belief system, mindset, and attitudes of the people. Today many young people do not even remember the traditional stories, songs, and dances. They do not understand the significance of the patterns on their tribal shawls, nor do they revere nature as their ancestors did.

Keywords: Colonizer, Christianity, Nagas, Culture, Traditions, and Britishers

Objectives: The main objective of the current research is to revitalize the Naga tribal history through post-colonial Nagas people's perspectives. Cultural disorientation and restoration are also key objectives in forming the current study.

Methods: The current research is a qualitative method of re-read, re-examining, and re-construct the Naga tribal colonial history of Christianity from a Naga tribal people's perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The colonial missionaries brought education and development in a basically closed world, a world in which the British were not allowed to enter the tribal belts by the British administration. Today, modernization has been introduced and many changes have taken place in this most forgotten part of the world. But the process of change that came with the coming of colonial Christian

missionaries has also its own setbacks as we look at the situation of the Naga tribals in Nagaland today. Many of the good traditional values and cultural heritages have been lost today. The Nagas were made to see that what they practice or do or think is inferior needs to be replaced with western practices and foreign ideology. The Nagas were too naïve to think about the future consequences. The coming of Colonial Christian missionaries has therefore almost destroyed the tribal culture (Razouselie, 2006). So, today with a genuine desire to regain what has been almost lost the Nagas are addressing this issue which at the same time seems to be fighting a losing battle. Therefore, there is an urgent need to salvage what can be saved because the Naga tribals are under threat of totally losing everything.

The Current Scenario

No culture or society is static and therefore it is very natural to talk of the change taking place everywhere in any given culture and society. But the change taking place among the Naga tribals in Nagaland is not much of an evolution but a replacement model which has been pervasive. This pervasive character of change is a serious threat to the extinction of the rich cultural heritage of the tribals in this region (Bastin, 1999). Westernization is a serious issue today? Why Western is considered superior and Indian or Tribal is taken as inferior? This leads to the overriding of local cultures by a foreign culture which poses a great threat to the tribal way of life and subsistence.

Rapid social changes are taking place. Old patterns of life are disappearing, forests are dwindling, many species are getting extinct, and social customs and traditional

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values are being abandoned as new ambitions and desires take over. The question may be asked whether this is a quasi-natural process, a matter of dying away of old, or whether it is the result of violent, destructive interventions... the tribal way of life and outlook on life, which is being eroded and undermined by the present process of change, has to be valued and which elements of it ought to be rescued and reaffirmed over against the destructive and blind onslaught of change (Razouselie, 2006). Change has come about with the coming of Western missionaries. Christianity could not be made a tribal Christianity till today. Culture or traditional values are no longer seen as something to be preserved by the younger generation, but as mere practices of western Christianity (Murry, 1998).

Music and Naga Tribal Culture

Western style of living is the immediate attraction for the younger generation in Nagaland today. As Murry (1998) observes, "the tribals were a singing community even before the singing Christianity came to them." But this gift has been not used to protect and preserve the indigenous music and songs which contains rich stories and values of tribal life. Instead today mostly English songs and western music are used in Church worship services and when you switch on to the local TV channels we see many young people trying their best to imitate Brad Paisley, Taylor Swift, Little Big Town, Lorde, Sean Paul, CCR, Don William, Bryn Adam, etc. and many of them in a very unsuccessful way. Instead of emitting them, it would have been glorious for them to compose some indigenous songs or write songs in the local tongue to utilize their inborn talent as gifted singers and praise God in their rich cultural milieu (Razouselie, 2006).

Costume/Dress and the Naga's

The dress cryptogram of the tribals among the youth has gone the worst. Western fashion is the only dress the younger generations prefer. The most modernized fashion in the world is found being used among the Naga tribals in Nagaland where there are no models or great designers. Traditional dress or any dress related to culture is seen as inferior and not suitable for modern use by the younger generation. This is a wrong outlook of one's own culture or custom. Many tribes are trying to label their dress with cultural patterns in a bid to preserve their rich cultural heritage. But this is yet to be accepted by the younger generation. The older generation therefore today lament that the Naga tribal culture is being slowly eroded and they see outside force as the culprit which is slowly sweeping away the younger generation from their own cultural roots (Wati, 1999).

Morality, Ethics, and the Nagas

Immorality, which was little known in the Naga tribal world, is now a common topic. Broken homes, broken marriages, and unstable marriages, changing attitudes toward sexual behavior are visible pointers that all is not well with Naga tribals today. Drug and substance abuse has become a very serious problem among younger people; especially in Naga-situated areas that have been seriously affected by this problem. Along with this, HIV & AIDS is a serious issue confronting the region today, and the Western influence on this problem is very obvious. Media may also be blamed but the real culprit is the colonial

missionaries' way of doing away with the tribal ethics and ethos of life that controlled the tribal world and ways of living (Wati, 1999). The Gospel that the colonial missionaries conveyed brought along with it the recovery of tribal dignity as human beings. But at the same time, the concept of an all-forgiving God has made the tribals relax most of their inborn integrity. There was much respect for life and it was considered improper to kill anyone except in war. People who kill someone apart from war are ostracized from the community, which is the ultimate shame for a tribal. Honesty marked the tribal's simple life and fear of power always controlled them in their simple living lifestyle (Murry, E., 1998). The Nagas are known for their simplicity and unpretentious life, in their words and works. However, today the tribal world pictures a very different setup. The situation is perhaps worse than in those days of headhunting, and now the land practices gun culture, and perhaps in the last two decades, more people have been killed than in those days of headhunting.

Christian Worship and the Naga Tribals

Worship in the churches of the Nagas in Nagaland is nothing different than the Western way of worship. There is no one item in the worship that would express the living culture of the people. Worship is very westernized. What went wrong was that the Nagas shunned their own culture and rich heritage of which they should be proud. Perhaps, the missionaries' attitude towards the tribals and their ways of life, the British rule of the region with negligence, inadequate education that did not address these issues, or political and economic negligence by the Indian government have resulted in the erosion of cultural values among the Nagas in Nagaland. But one of the main causes may be the colonial missionaries' role in disconcerting the cultural values of the tribals with their extermination model that almost eliminated the rich cultural practice and ethos of the tribal's life (Renthly, 1995).

What Went Wrong?

The researcher would claim that the colonial Christian missionaries had a great deal of responsibility for the slow eroding of the tradition and cultural values of the indigenous tribals in Nagaland. When the missionaries came and found the Naga tribals of Nagaland, they presented the Gospel without considering the value of the cultures surrounding them. Two methods prominently worked in the evangelization of the tribal's of Nagaland.

The first one is the transmission model. The obvious reason behind this blind transmission of Christianity to the Nagas is that they did neither understand the culture nor did they try to understand culture. No local text was deemed necessary to be promoted by the colonial missionaries. Rather, they introduced western education which was done totally from a western perspective (Razouselie, 2006). The *morung* (bachelor's dormitory) which is a form of education where practical moral values were imparted to the young people and therefore invaluable to tribal culture was simply replaced by western education which did not deal much with the moral and practical ways of living. The western colonial missionary method was a one-way transmission model. No dialogue was considered necessary and the gospel was simply injected into the tribal culture. This somewhat became an enculturation process but it demeaned the cultural values of the tribals. Secondly, the extermination model was also at play. The Missionaries saw very little that could be

appreciated in the tribal ways of life and living and even in their tribal worldview. They literally covered the tribals with the Gospel without assessing the damage they were making to the rich tribal culture (Downs, 1971).

The Nagas had no written text but their tradition and customs and ways of life were encoded in their hearts, in their folk songs, mythologies, in their custom, and practices. When an effort was not made to understand or tape this tribal resource in the face of the non-availability of a written tradition, the tribals faced the imminent threat of losing their cultural heritage. The tribals were thus given the impression that their traditional ways and values of life were inferior to the new culture that was being introduced in the form of religion. And in this process, many good values and practices of the tribals were simply done away with (Wati, 1996).

The failure of western colonial missionaries lies in this fact of missionary method which regarded the tribal culture as non-entity or uncivilized, uncultured, or barbarous. This total negligence of what the tribals valued in the given situation is one of the reasons why Nagas are facing the problem of cultural erosion today. The colonial missionaries brought the Gospel along with their culture and in the tribal world of those days, there was simply no dichotomy between religion and culture or secular and so when the missionaries came with the gospel the tribals adopted the ways of living of the Gospel barriers (Westerners) as well as leaving aside their own harmonious ways of living. The Nagas themselves today must recognize this mistake made a century and a half ago and rectify the mistake at an urgent pace. But if the Naga's continued the trend in which they live today they will become rootless people losing everything: language, culture, and economy. The Naga tribals still have all these elements which make up a community (Wati, 1999). Whatever has been lost or is in danger of totally being lost can still be reclaimed, recalled, and restored. It is very biblical to protect one's own culture and customs because it is God's gift to humanity.

Cultural Disorientation and Restoration

Tribals were and are eco-friendly people. In the words of Wati (1996), "For tribals, the affirmation is that "Supreme Being" created the land and it belongs to "God" is the starting point of theology. The land is the center and key to understanding the tribal's worldview. Human selfhood, the Supreme Being, the spirit, history, and ethics are defined and perceived only in relation to the land. In short, the land is the basic component of the spirituality of the tribal people. The whole of reality is approached from the perspective of the land. Therefore, for the tribals, the land is a profound theological issue" (Downs, 2011). In other words tribals believed that "there was an intricate relationship among all things animate and inanimate, human and non-human, spiritual and material-that has always to be maintained in proper balance." But today this good and friendly attitude towards creation and nature is totally lost in the tribal world. Trees and forests are rampantly being denuded causing species extinction in most of the Naga's inhabited areas. This happened with the coming of colonial Christianity which imported an anthropocentric worldview (Dawn, 2000). Therefore this is an era where the Nagas must deeply and critically consider the tribal worldview.

The concept of salvation with the puritan attitude swept the tribal world. The community-centered spirituality was shifted to individual soul-saving

spirituality. This has led to the loss of community-centered spirituality and life. The Nagas are basically identified not as an individual but as a tribe, clan, or family. But today individualism is taking its toll. Salvation is seen from an individualistic perspective and therefore all others beyond the self, become irrelevant. Taboos were very significantly related to the tribals in their religious and cultural expression. Most of the taboos existed as a part of the preservation of nature. For, example, it is considered taboo to kill an animal that is pregnant. Therefore, for the tribal, hunting and fishing during the breeding season was not allowed. Today with the concept of taboo done away with, the Nagas who love hunting and fishing, sometimes as a community game, many of the forests in the tribal area are without animals and birds, and the river is without fish. Trees that were once the object of worship are now seen as a commercial commodity that would fetch them a sundry income and they are rampantly cut and sold, as a result, many forests are now denuded, introducing an ecological threat to the tribals who mostly depend on the forest produce for their subsistence. The need of today is not to do away with Christianity. It is our faith, our one religion but the need of the hour is to deeply root Christianity into our culture while holding the historic faith of the Christian Church and thus profess a tribal or indigenous Christianity and not western colonial Christianity that still prevails in the region and still looks at the Naga tribals ways of life as inferior, illogical, or irrational, etc.

Conclusion

No doubt that the British regime imposed new laws and regulations and divided the land and the people, to suit its administrative convenience and commercial ambition. To worsen the confused state of mind of the people, the colonial missionaries came to propagate a new religion. The colonial missionaries understood that they had come to build a kingdom that was not of this world. Therefore, to introduce Christianity they historicized the Christian faith at the expense of rejecting the local religion. Both Christianity as a new faith and Britain as a colonizer made the Naga people suffer losses of their land, identity, and selfhood. On the other hand, the Nagas found their dignity with the coming of the colonial missionaries from the west, and for this, the Naga tribals in Nagaland will always be indebted to these missions that brought freedom and human worth to a people almost neglected and unknown by the world (Keitzar, 1995). But the tribals also need to accept and realized the fact that along with Christianity, Western culture was introduced and somehow this got assimilated into the tribal culture. Subsequently, this alien culture became the dominant culture and overrode the local culture. The Nagas can still call for restoration because they still have their language, culture (on the verge of disappearance), and socio-economy.

On the other hand, the Nagas must know that they are in the stage of "No culture or Customs means No Tribe," and if the tribals continued the trend in which they live today they will become rootless people losing everything, such as their cultural and traditional elements. The tribals still have all these elements, on the verge of disappearance, which makes up a community. Whatever has been lost or is in danger of totally being lost can still be reclaimed, recalled, and restored.

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