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Christianity and the “Others”

On Conversion of the Tangkhul Nagas

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Abstract

This article explores the attitudinal and ideological underpinning of the Christian conversion of a society in northeastern India. It is a modest attempt to demonstrate that the methods of conversion employed by the missionary Rev. William Pettigrew reflected one significant conventional western missionary approach that was grounded in an evolutionary understanding of social change and progress. Yet, for all of Pettigrew’s contempt towards the native society, this article asserts that a fundamental compatibility between the pre-existing and the new religious patterns laid the groundwork for the successful implantation of the Christian tradition among the Tangkhul Naga tribe.

Keywords: Christianity, conversion, Tangkhul Nagas, traditional religion, social change

Introduction

Some evolutionary social theorists’ (e.g., Tylor, Spencer, Lubbock, and Morgan) understanding of social change and progress is grounded on the idea of the unilinear development of societies and cultures through marked stages (Boas 1940, 281–82). Simpler and smaller-scale societies were seen as moving from “simple” to “complex” or from the “primitive” to “civilized” (Giddens 1982) and were often compared to partially functional organisms versus fully grown and, therefore, more efficient ones (Durkheim 1964). Such views gave rise to the theory that changes in societies happen as a result of docile imitation wherein an active society transmits its cultural elements to a passive society. Such an approach denies the “passive,” receiving society the kind of refinement of a “functional” society to mold and shape its own future in the course of cultural diffusion, which is, of course, erroneous (Beattie

1980). Thus, the evolutionary theoretical framework of civilizational growth, which has often been the basis for Christian missionaries’ dealings with distant societies, tacitly suggests that western society and/or culture represented the highest form of humankind (Misra 1998). This meant that the “lower” societies and/or culture must emulate the higher forms of western civilization, resulting in the former reproducing the latter.

Against the backdrop of this theoretical view, this article attempts to provide an insider’s analysis of the methods and processes of conversion of the Tangkhul Nagas from their traditional religion to Christianity. The Tangkhul Nagas are one of the largest hill tribes of Manipur state in northeastern India. They reside mainly in the Ukhrul district with a total population of 1,83,115 (Census 2011). Before the introduction of Christianity in 1896 by the Rev. William Pettigrew they followed their own traditional religious pattern. Today, Christianity has become one of their key identity markers with every village dotted with impressive concrete churches. Christianity, in close coordination with colonialism, came in the garb of civilizing the “heathen” Tangkhul Nagas, ostensibly to salvaging the natives from “darkness to light,” from “headhunting to soul hunting,” and, therefore, from tradition to modernity (Khongreiwo 2013; Kapai 2019). This article looks at the attitudinal and ideological underpinning of Christian mission movements towards non-Christian societies. It is a modest attempt to demonstrate that the methods of conversion employed by the Rev. William Pettigrew reflected the conventional missionary approach that was grounded on an evolutionary understanding of social change and progress. Yet, for all of Pettigrew’s contempt towards the native society, this article asserts that a fundamental compatibility between the pre-existing and the new religious patterns laid the groundwork for the successful implantation of the Christian tradition among the Tangkhul Naga tribe.

Christians vs the Pagans (Civilizing the “Others”)

Consider the following statement that a young British colonial officer, John Butler, made about the Naga tribes in 1847: “very uncivilized race, with dark complexions [. . .] hideously wild and ugly visages; their faces and bodies tattooed in a most frightful manner by pricking the juice of the beta nut into the skin in a variety of fantastic figures. They are reckless of human life; treacherously murdering their neighbors often without provocation, or at best for a trivial cause of offence” (Elwin 1969, 515). Also consider how Rev. Pettigrew registered his empathy for the “heathen” Tangkhul Nagas’ state of behavior then: “The more one sees the conduct of these *poor, ignorant, superstitious* people, the more unworthy and helpless one feels” (Zeliang 2005, 16, emphasis added). Such condescending and denigrating remarks against the tribal communities of northeastern India and elsewhere are found recurrently in colonial ethnographies and Christian missionaries’ field reports and notes. The remarks are mostly bereft of currently accepted scientific observational norms. They sprang from the Victorian Era and early anthropological understanding of cultural difference in which “savage” communities were pitched against the more advanced European societies on the scale of human evolution and development. More often than not, the colonial officers and Christian missionaries employed their own culture as a “yardstick” to evaluate “other” cultures (Mandavilli 2019, 26).

Franz Boas (1921) had extensively dealt with this subject in his classic work *The Mind of Primitive Man* long ago. Boas assumed that European societies represented a higher form of

civilization, race, and culture because of their wonderful level of achievement. It was assumed that “as the civilization is higher; and, as the aptitude for civilization presumably depends upon the perfection of the mechanism of body and mind, the inference is drawn that the white race represents the highest type of perfection” (Boas 1921, 2). And, thus, any society that did not correspond with the European ideal was considered a lesser civilization. Such assumptions gave rise to harsh judgements towards peoples who did not exhibit similar intellectual, emotional, and moral processes as the Europeans’ own; the greater the social status, the harsher the judgement. Yet, far from being the monopoly of a single people or area, civilizations have moved from place to place; they have been transferred from people to people. In other words, the “ideal” form of human civilization that individuals may admire bears the contribution of various peoples. In the same fashion, cultures have always been in circulation; cultures have never been confined to fixed locations. Ideas, practices, goods, ideologies, technologies, etc. have always been on the move from people to people and place to place, acquiring new meanings and shapes throughout the history of mankind (Rodgers 2013, 2).

The colonial missionaries who worked in the Naga areas, on the other hand, often leaned towards older evolutionary anthropologists’ understanding of human society and culture. The basis for missionary intervention was accomplished by terming the hill tribes’ way of life as “savagery” and “lawlessness” (Misra 1998). Even as the missionaries were influenced by the biblical message to “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), their mode of intervention has been criticized by native scholars and others. Christian missionaries and colonialism both sought to intervene to liberate the Nagas, including the Tangkhuls, from the presumed bondage of socio-cultural and religious backwardness. It was assumed that “civilizing” the native society was their duty and a necessary precondition to prepare the native peoples for a full-scale missionary onslaught (Thong 2012, 898).¹ Therefore, to “raise the savage to a higher level,” Henry Balfour (1923, 17–20) remarked during one of his presidential addresses to the British Folklore Society that, “as civilized persons, concerned, whether we call ourselves folk-lorists, anthropologists, government officials, missionaries, traders or merely ordinary ‘men in the street.’ We all share in the responsibilities arising from our assumption of the right to control the destinies of peoples in a backward state of culture. . . . the Nagas are still very largely unaffected by influence from the outside, and remain to this day primitive pagans.” Such Western ethnocentrism was continuously reflected in the Christian missionaries’ mode of intervention throughout the missionization processes. By appropriating “the right to control the destinies” of the Naga tribes, the Christian missionaries, in a show of utter disrespect for local culture, tried to dismantle the pre-existing socio-cultural and religious structures, only to replace them with elements from western society and its culture.

Christianity as a religion emerged in the Middle East early in the millennium of the Common Era. Since then, it has travelled to every corner of the inhabited continents and has become an integral part of many peoples’ beliefs. In ancient Rome, people disconnected from urban cities and, therefore, not forming part of the Christian community came to be known

¹ Other Christian missionaries of the time believed that civilizing must follow Christianization. While others favored simultaneous introduction of the two (for details see Woolmington 1986).

by the term “pagans” from *paganus*, meaning “countryman” (Stark 1996, 10). The term incorporated non-Christian communities whom the early Christians hoped to Christianize; these non-Christians were sometimes subjected to contempt and suspicion. In a later instance, Christopher Columbus was accommodating in his description of the people he invented as Indians, but “when these mythical Indians defied or opposed the invaders, they came to be seen as the fierce, wild Caribs, cannibals to the last man, woman and child” (Alvares and Alvares 1994, 21–24). This method of “Othering” became a global tool in the hands of Europe in its dealings with non-Europeans across the world, particularly Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Non-Europeans were seen as the inferior race and savages who did not live in accordance with “natural law” or Christian beliefs, and thus needed to be civilized. Civilizing the savages was not complete in conversion, but it required assimilation into the European manners and mores, including changes in dress, personal names, food, marriage customs, houses, family connections, language, festivals, political affiliation, and so on. Thus, the western Christian missionaries in Tangkhul Naga country and other Naga areas succeeded in totally transforming the ways of life in the name of civilization and improving the “savages” into real “men.”

Situating Christian Mission in India

According to one local tradition, Christianity has a long history in India, with the apostle Thomas having ostensibly reached the country by sea in 52 CE (Sangma 1987, 13).² Tradition said that Thomas was “martyred” by Brahmin Hindus because of his successful Christianization of native communities, which included the implantation of seven churches at Cranganore, Quilon, Parur, Gokamangalam, Niranam, Chayil, and Palur (Palayur) (John 2007, 82). The Syrian Christians in Kerala, on the other hand, are said to be associated with the church in east Syria (then identified with Mesopotamia and Persia), whose missionaries had purportedly evangelized Indians in between 250 and 300 CE (Sangma 1987, 14). Roman Catholics were the next Christians to arrive in India following the capture of Goa by the Portuguese Afonso de Albuquerque in 1510. After this, Catholic missionaries were stationed at Cochin (southwest) and Tuticorn and Mylapore (southeast). Protestant missionaries first appeared in 1706 when Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Pluetschau were dispatched to India by King Frederick IV of Denmark (Woba 2019, 51). They were stationed at Tranquebar in what was then Madras state, now Tamil Nadu (Blair 2008, 48). With the passing of the Charter Act of 1813 by the East India Company, permitting mission activity all over the country, several mission societies from Europe and America reached India for mission work (Jetty 2019, 126).

The trajectory of missionary intervention in India took more than one form. While some missionaries displayed reasonable respect for local traditions and customs, others resorted to an approach that included use of force and other questionable methods to restrict the local culture. Apart from a few missionaries who sought to intervene in a respectful manner for the native socio-cultural pattern, “the common run of the missionaries, including the Jesuits, saw no elements in the native culture that they could emulate, and much less consider as superior to their own culture” (De Souza 1994, 40–41). Native religion was always referred to “as

² Western tradition, on the other hand, held that Thomas reached India through well-established trade routes (Sangma 1987, 13).

worship of the devil” (De Souza 1994, 40–41). When Portuguese Catholics took control of the Syrian Christians in Kerala (its traditions being closely related to Hindu religio-culture), the intervention was initiated on the pretext of it being a false belief (Bakshi 2008, 12). In 1559, the Catholic archbishop of Goa, Alexis de Menezes, imposed several restrictions upon Syrian Christians that included prohibiting of use of Hindu names and the compulsory wearing of Roman Catholic gowns and cassocks (Bakshi 2008, 12).

In Goa, the Catholic missionaries, with the active backing of Portuguese authorities, employed various methods of conversion, including both the use of prohibitive laws and the granting of material benefits and other privileges. The Goa Inquisition or the Portuguese Act of 1547 imposed several restrictions on non-Christians (Kulkarni 1994, 62, 93–94). Through the systematic destruction of Hindu temples, wells, and images of Hindu gods, and a prohibition against Hindu festivals, the Portuguese virtually forced the native “social groups (often entire villages) [to turn] to Catholicism” (Kulkarni 1994, 62). The Portuguese also used food symbolism to engineer the expulsion of individual members from their Hindu social group. The food hierarchy of Hindu tradition prohibits one to consume meat, particularly beef. By forcing beef on some individuals, the Portuguese rendered them outcast from their own community. The outcasts were then easily assimilated into the Catholic fold (Kulkarni 1994, 62–63). Such missionary approaches that dislodged the people from their own culture and traditional past were intended to produce devout Christians; these approaches emphasized the personal transformation and moral reformation of native converts (Blair 2008, 118).

As mentioned earlier, not all missionaries took this culturally destructive approach; some missionaries did believe that the Christian faith could be transmitted in a harmonious dialogue with the native social, religious, and cultural patterns. Some of the Jesuits, such as Robert de Nobili, Matteo Ricci, and Joseph Beschi,³ are credited with advocating a cross-cultural transmission of the Christian tradition. Instead of scorning and rejecting the native religion and culture, as some missionaries did, they tried to mold and shape Christianity to suit the local settings. De Nobili, in his attempt to convert the high-caste Indians, adapted himself to Brahmanical ways of life. He avoided meat and became a vegetarian, and adorned himself with Hindu religious attire (Karasek 2019, 94). Among the Protestant missionaries, Zeigenbalg of the Danish mission was said to carefully subvert Indian social and cultural structures. The church at Tranquebar allowed native converts belonging to different castes to occupy separate seats during church services. Zeigenbalg also adopted preaching considered suitable to local tastes. In fact, Zeigenbalg was generous in accommodating local culture and tradition. Christian ceremonies and events such as weddings, burial and funeral ceremonies, clothing habits, etc., were largely modified and readjusted to suit the local setting (Woba 2019, 55–56).

Incorporating native elements in the process of missionization happened at multiple levels and locations and continued well beyond the height of western Christian missionaries in India. In Kerala, a certain group of native converts (Kurishumala Ashram) practice a Christian liturgy called *Bharatiya Pooja* – a ritual resulting from a synthesis of a Christian Mass and Hindu Pooja. It involves the appropriation of Hindu texts, terminologies, and philosophy

³ The three Jesuits hail from Italy. According to De Souza (1994, 40–41), missionaries from Italy were more accommodating towards local culture, while missionaries from western Europe that formed part of the former Holy Roman Empire were “more conscious of their cultural superiority and less accommodating.”

(Karasek 2019, 93). Bhavani Charan Banerjee, who later changed his name to Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, was a native Catholic convert (initially an Anglican convert) who strongly advocated adoption of the system of *Advaita Vedanta* – a Hindu philosophy akin to the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity (Karasek 2019, 93). D. S. Amalorpavadass, the founder of the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Center (NBCLC), was instrumental in adapting Christianity to Hindu culture in modern day Tamil Nadu. This process has been termed by some scholars as the Indianization of Christianity (Karasek 2019). Conversely, Alvares and Alvares (1994, 30–31) call it the “Christianization of Hinduism,” because “the form of the response was to model Hinduism on the same lines as Christianity, with its own sacred books, the *Vedas* and the *Gita*, mission schools, missionaries and so on, imitation being the sincerest form of flattery.” Therefore, drawing parallels between evangelical movements and the *Bhakti* movement (which helped in increasing the appeal of Christian messages among the potential would-be converts), Jones (2017, 6–14) argued that Christianity did not completely replace the Hindu religion, but that it was grafted, modified, and built upon the existing Hindu religious patterns.

One of the reasons behind the Christian missionaries’ shift in mission tactics from one that focused on producing devout Christians and thoroughly morally reformed native converts, to one that was broader and more holistic in approach, addressing the needs of both “body and soul” (particularly towards the end of the 19th century [Hardiman 2008]), was partly to convince higher caste Hindus to join the new religion, and partly because the former approach had not yielded many converts (Blair 2008, 118). Nobili’s primary interest in adapting to Hindu ways and manners was to attract the Brahmanical and other high-caste Hindus. The missionary, whose parent body the Jesuits even attempted to convert Emperor Akbar, was somehow successful (in Madurai around 1606) “because the Hindus mistook him as the head of a new Hindu reforming sect” (Alvares and Alvares 1994, 30). Yet, on the whole, response from the higher caste Hindus was lackluster and slow at best.⁴ There was a gross misjudgment, on the part of the Christian missionaries, of the caste system as some sort of superstitious practice (Blair 2008). Nobili for one looked at the caste system as social structure. He believed that winning over the souls of the Brahmanical social order would lead to the downfall of the caste structure itself. In reality, the caste system happened to be a well-established socio-religious structure that drew its strength from the voluminous Vedantic Hindu texts having deep philosophical roots. It was then realized that:

[T]he caste system is a harmonious whole. It is like the planetary system where the planets rotate around their axis and revolve round the sun. The various castes similarly have their own peculiar functions and all together revolve round the “Sanatan Dharma.” In a well-regulated watch the various wheels are subservient to each other and cannot move or stop separately. In the same way castes do not move separately, they are dependent to each other for their existence and mutual help. Hence, the difficulty of converting a whole caste

⁴ The majority of Nobili’s recruits were drawn from Shudras, the caste occupying the lowest rung in the varna scheme (John 2007, 87).

(*Nishkalank*, a monthly periodical of Roman Catholic mission in Ranchi, cited in Bakshi 2008, 90–91).

Even if there occurred sporadic conversions among the higher caste Hindus, the efforts of the missionaries proved to be counterproductive. In Ahmedabad, although the Jesuits successfully converted some influential Brahmin families, the Hindu priests refuted the missionary teaching “and thereby checked the tide of conversion” (Kulkarni 1994, 95). During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Brahmins devised several methods to win back the native converts, resulting in the reconversion of Hindus and Muslims in large numbers (Kulkarni 1994, 96). Also, several Hindu reformation movements surfaced to counterbalance the influence of the Christian teachings in the beginning of the 19th century. For example, in response to William Carey (1761–1833) in Bengal, Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1827. Ram Mohan Roy, even as he opposed Christian doctrines, appropriated positive Christian values to advance his own reformed Hindu worldview (Blair 2008, 33–34). Another well-known personality, Swami Dayananda Saraswati founded the Vedic-based Arya Samaj in 1875, whose movement led to the growth of a form of Hindu reconversion or rebaptism ceremony called *shudhi* (Blair 2008, 34). Mahatma Gandhi is another prominent figure who fiercely opposed Christian missionaries’ attitudes towards Hinduism and its tradition (Souza 1994, 34). So there emerged a strong opposition from the majority and dominant Hindu groups who viewed Christianization as an attempt to uproot Hindu culture and religion. The upper castes were also opposed to the conversion of the lower castes and the “untouchables,” as converting them would amount to the higher castes losing control over a part of the population. The modern-day evidence of such Hindu counter-reaction can be observed in certain Hindu-leaning Indian state governments passing controversial laws to curb religious conversion.

So, it emerges that a majority of Christian converts in India originated from the excluded social strata comprising of lower castes (Shudras), the “untouchables” (Dalits/Scheduled Caste), and tribal communities (Adivasis). These underprivileged castes were willing to receive external support to mitigate their lowly socio-economic condition (Jetty 2019, 127). Partly in response to their prevailing disadvantaged social position, people on the lower rungs of society turned to Christianity en bloc. It was a community decision rather than an individual decision that sought to loose themselves from the shackles of socio-economic and religious deprivation and oppression (Blair 2008, 44). The missionaries, particularly from the 19th century onwards, having better understood the social settings of India, adjusted to a more holistic missionary approach that took into consideration the social, economic, and educational interests of the poor sections of Indian society. The response from the deprived native society was overwhelmingly positive. For instance, the desire for upward caste mobility led to increased demand for western and English education among the lower caste Hindus (Kulkarni 1994, 124). It is, therefore, advanced by most scholars that Christian converts in India, like their counterparts in South Africa, had secular motives in mind. While Indian converts wanted to achieve socio-economic mobility and escape from their earlier oppressive caste system, South African converts wanted to come out of their discriminatory racial regime (John 2007).

Yet, secular needs may not have been the sole consideration for Indian natives to turn on to Christianity. The pre-existing socio-cultural and religious patterns of the depressed castes, which were substantially different from the higher caste Hindus, made them open to new ideas and practices (Blair 2008, 45). The missionaries also attracted the attention of the new converts

through effective administration of Christian theology. “Understanding the *Otiase* High God of the Adivasi [sic] makes comprehension of a Creator God more easily grasped. When the bridge is made from this concept to the God of the Bible then greater comprehension is gained. The call for justice in the writings of the Minor Prophets in the Old Testament of the Bible resonates strongly with people under oppression” (Blair 2008, 45). The biblical message as advanced by the Christian missionaries gave the disadvantaged groups a sense of worth and achievement as persons equally created in the image of God. This self-worth was denied them in the traditional varna scheme of social stratification. So, conversion of the Dalits and Adivasis thrived not only on their social needs but also on their spiritual needs. To validate this claim, Blair (2008, 59) cites the persistence of the indigenous evangelical movement within India even in the wake of a massive persecution movement from the caste Hindu society. Jetty (2019, 128) went as far to claim that the converts were truly seeking salvation, although he is aware that their decision to convert could have been affected by the benefits they received from the missionaries.

In the northeastern parts of India, Christianization began in the 17th and 18th centuries with Roman Catholics being the first to develop social contact with its communities.⁵ There are records of the existence of local Christian community numbering about 7000 in 1682 and two churches in 1696 at Rangamati in the Goalpara district of Lower Assam (Sangma 1987, 15). Among the Protestant Christians, Baptist missionaries under the Serampore Mission were the first to reach out to northeastern communities. A local missionary named Pal first contacted the Khasis in the year 1813 at the behest of William Carey. Carey had already arrived in Calcutta in November 11, 1783, and had established the Seprampore College in 1818 for mission purposes (Sangma 1987, 17–18). Missionary intervention and approaches in northeastern India took a slightly different turn in that most Christian missionaries resorted to the approach of cultural replacement; an approach synonymously identified by many with the phrase “civilizing the savages.” Although Christianization is said to be “uniquely indigenized” in some cases, as allegedly happened with the Mizos (Pachauu 1997), dislocation and interruption of the pre-existing social, cultural, and religious equilibrium constituted an integral part of the conversion process (Bhattacharjee 2017, 38–39). Under this specter of “civilizing” missions of Christian missionaries, the following sections explore the phenomenon of religious conversion of the Tangkhul Naga tribe of northeastern India.

Rev. William Pettigrew and His Perception of Native Culture

According to Preston (1979), Christianity has always sought to bring a new social order through the intervention of the church. Although in the process, Christianity itself underwent visible changes and adaptations that bear the impression of many cultures (Walls 1985). Christian missionaries, particularly of “The Great Age of Missions” of the 19th century took to evangelism and social services in many forms. The period also saw the active involvement of women missionaries to better deal with inflexible, deeply rooted tribal social structures. Through the lens of “civilizing mission,” the missionaries of the day sought to initiate radical changes in the rather insular societies. Such an approach had little room for proper

⁵ For details on early Christian missions in various North Eastern states, see Pachauu’s (2003) “Church-Mission Dynamics in Northeast India.”

contextualization of the Christian faith in its new environs. Instead, it allowed for an excessively subjective evaluation and opinionated judgement of native society and its culture (see Nemer 2015, 29–30).

Rev. William Pettigrew was a product of the same missionary enterprise. Born on January 5, 1869, in Edinburgh, Scotland, and trained at Arthington Aborigines Training School, Pettigrew became a certified missionary at the age of 21. He reached India in 1890 to missionize the tribal communities of the east of Bengal under Arthington Aborigines Mission. Later he switched his organizational affiliation to the American Baptist Missionary Union when he decided to proselytize the “heathen” and “devil worshipping” Tangkhul Nagas in 1896. The Christian missionaries, having Christ as their center of belief and faith, looked at the non-Christian Tangkhuls as “pagans,” “heathens,” “animists,” “devil worshippers,” “superstitious,” and so on. To the missionaries’ eyes, the cultural and religious practices of the Tangkhul Nagas were not only sinful and unholy but were anathema to the basic tenets and principles of the Christian faith. While Christians represented the forgiven and redeemed children of God through the blood of Jesus Christ, the pre-Christian Tangkhul natives represented the impure lost souls, so to say, who “prefer[ed] the wages of sin to the glorious work of the preaching of the Gospel” (Zeliang 2005, 23).

Pettigrew saw little or no value in the pre-existing Tangkhul social, cultural, and religious structures. The state of existence in their society was depicted as “barbarism” sans “civilization,” in which the latter term, as Pettigrew understood, simply meant “the opposite of barbarism, the European way of life as opposed to the ‘savage’ way” (Woolmington 1986, 92). Caricaturization of traditional religion and contempt for native elements continually occurred as Pettigrew tried to proselytize the Tangkhuls and sought to distance them from their cultural past. Segregation of the new converts from the local population in separate settlement areas popularly known as “Christian Compounds” in various Tangkhul villages was meant to nurture devout native Christians; it was not only a way of physical separation but a means to detach them from their social and cultural roots. Rather than looking at religion and culture as two interrelated but separate structures, the missionary saw culture as intimately enmeshed within the religious realm. A change in the latter, therefore, must be accompanied by corresponding changes in the former if conversion was to be meaningful. It was his understanding that by doing away with their social and cultural practices, the Tangkhuls would become true Christians. In order to discourage consumption of rice beer or *kebor*, and “to introduce total abstinence principles,” Pettigrew refused to accept *kebor* when offered, “and kept refusing, until no Naga of any village thinks of tendering the stuff to him” (see Zeliang 2005, 10). Rice beer being an integral part of Tangkhul social and cultural life, banning it amounted to a blanket ban on their culture. The native converts were strictly barred from participating in traditional festivals. Yet, they would often find themselves returning to their old ways of life. Though the phrase “old habits die hard” might be considered by modern missionaries, this did not occur to the sensible mind of Pettigrew when he referred to the natives as “a cowardly race [sic] of people” (Zeliang 2005, 22). Pettigrew, thus, with cautious optimism described the atmosphere then as “almost every village has heard the Gospel message, and the name of Jesus is known by the whole tribe. But as to any desire to forsake their devil worship and turn to the living God, there is none yet manifested. They are as conservative in their beliefs and superstitious as the bigoted Hindus in the valley” (Zeliang

2005, 24). Like most of his contemporary missionaries, Pettigrew considered proselytizing the natives as part of a civilizing mission that primarily involved imparting basic skills that enabled the natives to be assimilated into European society, while simultaneously distancing the locals from their social, cultural, and religious past; because “it was believed that a rejection of pagan ways was as vital as the replacing of pagan religions before Christianity could take a permanent hold” (Woolmington 1986, 90).

Methods and Processes of Conversion

School education occupies center stage in Christian mission movements among distant societies. It was also central to the introduction of the colonial language so that the colonial power could employ the natives in government jobs and thereby strengthen its administrative grip. The missionaries, on the other hand, had always depended on educational institutions as breeding grounds of Christian faith. In this regard, De Souza (1994, 41) commented that:

[T]he mastery of the [colonial] languages was a necessary tool for domination, specially at times when the colonial hold over the native populations was still uncertain. A clear proof of this is the dwindling interest in learning the native languages by the same religious orders who showed great interest in the earlier period by mid-18th century when the colonial control was firmly in place and the time had come to force the native to forget their languages and learn the languages of the colonial powers.

Western education was first brought to India by the Portuguese. On January 25, 1543, the Jesuits opened a college under the name of St. Paul in Goa. Initially, readings and instruction were provided in the vernacular languages, but later the colonial language was enforced as the medium of learning so that the native population would abandon their mother tongues and adopt the colonial language as their lingua franca (Heredia 1994, 118). It was Alexander Duff (1806–1876) who first introduced the idea of using educational institutions as grounds for evangelical purposes, although not all missionaries approved of his move.⁶ Later his idea was refined by William Miller (1838–1923) of the Free Church Mission Society of Scotland from using educational institutions for direct evangelicalism to a sort of “*preparatio evangelica*, where education would be the Christian leaven for Hinduism in order to bring ‘Christ to India’” (Heredia 1994, 122). This method was widely adopted by the later day Christian missionaries and mission schools became preparatory grounds for natives’ conversion into Christianity.

Not surprisingly, Pettigrew’s immediate priority was to open schools as soon as he came to dwell among the Tangkhul Nagas. Towards the end of 1896, the year he set foot on Tangkhul land, Pettigrew was ready with his first school at Ukhrul. He drew his earliest students from Hunphun and Hungpung villages, later expanded to cover more interior villages of the Tangkhul country. Initially, the natives were suspicious and apprehensive of the missionary’s intent and refused to send their children to the school. In such times the British colonial officers came in handy for missionaries. In fact, Pettigrew received his first batch of students only after the political agent of Manipur, Captain Cole, “threatened to burn down the

⁶ Alvares and Alvares (1994, 30), however, suggest that it was Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, a German priest associated with the Danish Royal Mission, who first introduced the idea of using schools as indispensable part of the church missions so that the new converts would be able to read and understand the message of Gospel.

whole villages” (Singh 1991, 86). At another time, Lieutenant Colonel J. Shakespear, also the former political agent of Manipur, ordered every large Tangkhul village to admit two boys each to the missionary school at Ukhrul. As Dena (1983, 166) remarked, very often, it required threat and punishment on the part of the British officers to get the local population to school. Pettigrew, for his part, tried to attract and retain student enrolment by distributing “sweets, religious pictures, clothing and many other curious foreign articles” (Singh 1991, 87). In other words, a kind of “carrot and stick” policy was employed to uplift the natives from their “barbarous” state of existence. While those who came to school were rewarded with financial incentives and employment, those who refused were punished with threat and imprisonment. Students were taught the Tangkhul language, Manipuri, and English, aside from the scriptures. Many of these students later became paid colonial government employees and workers, and some of them even became committed native evangelists. Seeing the economic benefits of education, the locals began to proactively demand more schools (Zeliang 2005, 25).

Indeed, Pettigrew did a commendable job in introducing education among the preliterate Tangkhul Nagas and other hill tribes of Manipur. He played a vital role in advancing literary culture in the Tangkhul community. Along with local translators, he worked to translate the English Bible into the vernacular, and he developed a Tangkhul hymn book and other textbooks including English-Tangkhul dictionary. However, education for its own sake was not his goal. While some scholars argued that Pettigrew was compelled to educate the hills peoples purely because they were ignorant, superstitious, and far removed from the modern scientific knowledge and development (Dena 1983), it later emerged that his stress on education did not go beyond the threshold of elementary education – the kind of education that enabled the natives to read and understand the Gospel, and nothing more (Zeliang 2005, 26; Dena 1983, 171).

Aside from catering to the educational needs of the natives, the missionary schools also served as the main location for recruitment and conversion. Religious instruction was allowed freely in the mission schools of the Ukhrul district. This was in contrast to the prevailing British India governmental education policy in which schools were supposed to maintain strict secular credentials (Heredia 1994). Partly in order not to antagonize the Hinduized Meiteis (an immediate neighboring community of the Tangkhuls), whose political relationship with the British was already precarious, the colonial authority restricted religious teachings in schools located in Imphal valley, the headquarters of the Meities (Zeliang 2005, 13). This restriction was removed, however, when it came to schools located in the hills. Pettigrew himself reported that the colonial government not only paid expenses for running the school at Ukhrul but, “No objection is made to Christian truth being taught” (Zeliang 2005, 12). In the same report, he further remarked that the school textbooks were designed “to inculcate Christian truth” and that, “The school is opened daily with singing and prayer” (Zeliang 2005, 12). It is not surprised, then, that 95 percent of the students enrolled in missionary schools converted to Christianity (Dena 1983, 168). Thus, it may not be too far-fetched to infer that Pettigrew’s interest in school education was to prepare the natives for converting to Christianity from their traditional religion.

The schools also served the secular needs of the British colonial regime. When Pettigrew was appointed as the superintendent of census operations in 1911, about a hundred students and mission workers were recruited as supervisors or enumerators. When the hill areas were

divided into subdivisions, the necessary manpower to run the new government offices were all recruited from among the students of the mission schools. Thus, the schools proved to be useful to the British government in Manipur. This also partially explains why some of the colonial officers favored missionizing the Tangkhul Nagas and other hill tribes of northeastern India. In fact, it was the colonial officers who invited the Christian missionaries to work in the Naga areas and other parts of northeastern India. They had hoped to tame the warring hills peoples through the message of the Gospel, and thereby protect their commercial interest in the plains colonies (Wijunamai 2020).

School education was followed by the deployment of modern medicines. When Pettigrew returned to Ukhrul from his furlough on December 2, 1905, he was equipped with some medical knowledge, a move by the missionary to better aid him in his proselytizing. Medical work was not only a way of healing the body, but also part of the missionary’s strategy to attack and destroy the “superstitious” belief system and traditional worldview of the native society. Hardiman (2008, 5), who undertook a study on medical missionary activities among the Bhils of southern Rajasthan and northern Gujarat, argued that more than just healing the sick, medicine constituted a process of modernizing a whole community: “the ‘medicine’ provided by the missionaries encompassed far more than just treatment for physical illness. What they were providing, rather, was an all-round therapy that was designed to ‘civilise’ the supposedly ‘primitive’ Bhils, bringing them into the light of a Christian modernity.”

Medical services drew the natives closer to the missionary, providing him the opportunity to “win more souls.” By 1907, Pettigrew had treated 2,017 patients, another 1,201 in 1908, and 2,200 in 1909 (Zeliang 2005), charging two paise (equivalent to one hundredth of a rupee) from each patient. At some point later, the Tangkhuls became dependent on him for all health issues (Shimray 2001; Singh 1991). Pettigrew, in his 1897 report, stated how a father and his ailing son had great hope in him. The boy had to be taken to Imphal for ulcer treatment at the Charitable Hospital. The boy not only “wished to be near us,” but he and his father displayed great dependence on them (Zeliang 2005, 5). That was a revealing report indeed. It speaks to a sudden paradigm shift in the mindset of the natives. They had witnessed the reliability and usefulness of scientific advancement in the history of human evolution, and therefore chose to depend on the proficiency of modern medical treatment rather than on their traditional methods of healing. The missionaries, by taking the natives to hospitals and administering prescribed medicines, gradually began to dispel the native peoples’ beliefs in malicious spirits as the prime movers of sickness and bad luck. Medical work, therefore, proved to be an effective tool in the missionaries’ effort to convert the natives (Dena 1983).

Another notable strategy adopted by Pettigrew was to groom a committed group of native evangelists who were trained and recruited from his missionary schools. This method as defined by D. R. Heise (1967) falls under a “concentrated” or “personalistic” missionary approach, wherein potential converts are separated from their society and trained intensively in education either in schools, hospitals, or orphanages. Following the British line of governing its colonies through the native representatives, wherein the British authority sits at the top and the native recruits at the bottom, the missionary created his own group of native evangelists to implement his orders and plan of conversion. As noted by Dena (1983, 182), mission and evangelism work better when native evangelists are involved because they are more adept at using their own language, socially better connected with the local population, have easier

access in terms of geography, and they could subsist at much lower pay than the white missionaries. Indeed, most Tangkhul churches bear the names of local persons as pioneers and/or founders of their churches. Among the native evangelists, M. K. Mikshā played an active role, and his dedication and contribution in spreading the Gospel was recognized by Pettigrew.

The strategies adopted by Pettigrew seemed to be paying off. Rev. U. M. Fox's⁷ report to the 12th Biennial Session of the American Baptist Mission Conference in 1913 mentions the gradual embracing of Christianity by the early Tangkhuls thus: "Moreover there are encouraging signs which gives hopes of whole villages stepping forward and accepting Christianity" (Zeliang 2005, 42). While at the same time it attributes others' unwillingness to accept Christianity to their desire to enjoy "revenues which come to them from their heathen feasts" (Zeliang 2005, 42). By 1921, the number of Tangkhuls "who have definitely given up heathenism and come to Christianity" figured around 2,500 (Zeliang 2005, 69). Pettigrew, after visiting a large number of villages, reported in the same year, "it seemed to us that the people were truly and earnestly seeking for light and were dissatisfied with their old worship of evil spirits" (Zeliang 2005, 67). Again in 1949, Dr. E. E. Brock reported that there were, in total, 169 churches with 11,121 members and 40 schools in the Ukhrul district; the figure stood at 216 churches with 13,712 members, 71 primary schools, 8 middle schools, and one high school in 1950.

Evangelization as a dialogical process involves the collision of oppositional forces between the old and the new religions. Therefore, Pettigrew's attempt to convert the native peoples did not come about without resistance and trouble. The native converts switched back and forth between the old system and the newly implanted religious order. For instance, in 1907 the total number of converts was reduced to seven from the original twelve members. Again in 1908 the lone Christian church, Phungyo Baptist Church, at Ukhrul split into two groups over a quarrel on traditional festivals. While one group favored active participation in festivals, the other wanted complete isolation of its members from such activities. Eventually, the church broke up and its members reduced to just fourteen from thirty-five.

Pressure from evangelists to isolate the people from their old cultural and religious way of life was met with corresponding, if not stronger, forces of objection. Among others, the most formidable resistance came from the village chiefs. Understandably, the tribal chiefs wanted to protect their culture and religion because they feared that deviating from their existing cultural and religious order would invite the wrath of their god. Conversion also meant losing their command over a certain population of the community. The village chiefs or *Awunga* are not only the political head of Tangkhul villages but also exercise overwhelming power in cultural and religious spheres. "Their words were the laws that bind the subjects who came to live under his territory," quipped A. S. Mawonshang, the chief of Peh (also Paoyi). In Somdal village, the chief and his council of elders or *hanga* repeatedly expressed their displeasure over the new Christian converts (Somdal Baptist Church 2009). The native Christians often experienced retribution from the village leaders in the form of penalties and fines. It was, therefore, important for Pettigrew to first win the favor of the village chiefs if he

⁷ Rev. U. M. Fox and his wife arrived in Ukhrul in November 1911 to help Pettigrew in his missionary work.

was to successfully bring the Tangkhuls within Christian fold. In fact, Pettigrew’s success in establishing his permanent mission station at Ukhrl in 1896 was partly attributed to the accommodating gesture of the village chief, H. A. Raihao. Purportedly, Raihao was not only friendly to the missionary but also formed part of the missionary’s first batch of students (Singh 1991). On a more practical note, Rev. Somi Kasomwoshi (current pastor of Ukhrl Town Baptist Church) surmised that if it was not for the Ukhrl village chief Raihao, who allowed Pettigrew to settle at Ukhrl, Christianity would not have come to the Tangkhul Nagas.

Christianity and the Tangkhul Naga Religious Worldview: Intersection of Old and New Patterns

The transplanting and absorption of Christian values and traditions must be explored in light of the pre-existing Tangkhul Naga religious worldview. Although Pettigrew conceived of the pre-existing local culture as antagonistic to Christianity, in reality it emerged that the core beliefs and values of the native cultural pattern formed a favorable basis for the successful landing of Christianity. In a way, Pettigrew’s fault lies in the failure to detach local cultural practices from the ones that can be labelled as religious practices or elements. For example, traditional folk songs known as *hao lāā*, with which Pettigrew was uncomfortable, need not necessarily be associated with the traditional religion. However, the missionary grouped everything that was indigenous under the expression “pagan ways” and wiped them out, together with the traditional religion, under the overarching blanket of Christianity. The paradox, however, is that the actual implanting of Christianity was possible, or at least aided, by the nature of the pre-existing patterns of Tangkhul Naga religious worldview and system. Although, the local religion lacked the kind of articulation found in some major world religions, such as Christianity, it did provide ample ideas and concepts upon which the incoming religion could be built.

During his interaction with the natives of Phungcham (a village in the northern Tangkhul area), colonial ethnographer Hodson (1911) learned of a nameless deity who had three sons. The eldest of them, called *Kumyou*, went under the earth where he gives judgements. The youngest brother ascended to heaven while the middle one stayed on earth (Hodson 1911, 111). The abodes of the three imaginary sons – from the youngest, *Kazingram* (Heaven or Sky), *Okathui* (Earth or World), and *Kazeiram* (Land of the Dead) – represent the basic cosmological structure of the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas. In the three-tiered structure of the Tangkhul Naga cosmological imagination (see Khongreiw 2011), *Kazingram* is the dwelling place of the supernatural god, who is omnipotent and omnipresent. He is variously known as *Zingbungleng*, *Ameowo* (or *Ameoa*), *Kazingpā*, or *Reisangchonme*. The second tier, *Okathui*, is the realm of the living – the natural world inhabited by humans, animals, plants, forests, mountains, rivers etc., along with the supernatural spirits locally known as *kameo* or *chipee*. *Kazeiram*, the third tier, constitutes a major component of the Tangkhul Naga religious beliefs and is the realm of the dead. The pre-Christian Tangkhuls believed that there was a second life after death. When a person dies his/her soul/spirit detached itself from the body and proceeds to *Kazeiram*, believed to be located beneath the earth. The souls of the dead continue to live in the land of the dead under the reign of a guardian spirit called *Kokto*. They are considered to be as conscious as the living, which is why the Tangkhuls used to bury the dead along with their

personal belongings, including animals and cooking wares, so that they may use them in *Kazeiram*.

Hodson (1911, 110) wrote that the natives also alternatively referred to the supernatural god as *Kazing Karei* (a corrupted version of *Kazing Ngalei*, meaning “heaven and earth”) under whose will “everything happens.” He was a powerful god who created the universe and everything in it. Yet, the natives were mostly silent when it came to the “moral attributes” of their god. In the religious conception of the traditional Tangkhul Naga society, the creator god was a remote deity who was considered uninterested in the day-to-day affairs of living persons. Their god was a benevolent god yet was not bothered to interfere in the lives of the people. The Tangkhuls, therefore, never developed what might be considered close, intimate relationship with their *deus otiosus*. Rather, their everyday life was under the watchful control of various lesser spirits, mostly ferocious ones (Kharay 2017). These are the guardian spirits of various landscapes, places, spaces, and objects, such as, *shim kameo* (house spirit/deity), *lui kameo* (field spirit/deity), *lung kameo* (rock/stone spirit/deity), *kong kameo* (river spirit/deity), and *kaphung kameo* (mountain spirit/deity). These hosts of malevolent lesser spirits were considered the prime movers of all sorts of misfortunes in life. When death, sickness, accidents, natural calamities, and bad luck struck, the native people attribute those to the actions of the cruel spirits. Tangkhul Naga cosmology seemed to view the lesser spirits as constantly watching out to punish wrongdoers. The ill effects or intentions of the malevolent spirits could be, however, thwarted by means of sacrificial rituals. In pre-Christian days, the Tangkhuls engaged themselves in appeasing the lesser spirits by offering food materials and animals while their attention to the supreme god was minimized because he was supposedly good.

As Christianity arrived, this order of attention was reversed through sophisticated administration of Christian theology. Since Tangkhul Naga life could be miserably fearful under the constant threat of the cruel and reckless evil spirits, the idea of a powerful and loving god of Christians as introduced by the missionaries must have touched the hearts of the hills peoples. The theological message of the Christian missionaries, that god protects and sustains life and loves those who love him, resonated with the native converts. In a similar vein, Stark (1996) argued that conversion was more successful in Greco-Roman society when the Christian god was pitched against the Greek or Roman gods. The “pagan” gods did not offer salvation, unlike the Christians who were promised a glorious and peaceful life after death (Stark 1996, 85–88). As narrated by Remember Rimai, an influential native pastor, there was no belief among the pre-Christian Tangkhuls in a god who forgave sins and secured eternal life. Such Christian theological articulation played its own role in attracting genuine native converts. It is also true that traces of dissatisfaction with the pre-existing religious system were present in some of the native converts, which pushed them to Christianity. In a previous study by Kharay (2016), the founder of a church in one northern Tangkhul village converted to Christianity because he was purportedly angry with the guardian spirit of his house.

If effective administration and elaborate explanation of Christian theology could be one reason for the easy acceptance of missionary religions across the world, as Moore (1987, 92) held, then traces of overlapping religious and/or spiritual worldview between the pre-existing system and Christianity further aided the momentum. According to Vashum (2014, 147), an eminent native theologian, the traditional religious worldview of the Tangkhuls resonates in

perfect harmony with that of Christianity: "The tribal worldview affirms the wholeness of life, . . . makes no distinction between what is secular and sacred, earthly and heavenly, mundane life and spiritual life. This worldview . . . is very Christian and goes in line with the teaching of Jesus Christ." Also, the biblical instruction "for responsible stewardship of all God's creation" corresponds well with the tribal understanding of the interrelatedness between man and his natural environment (Vashum 2014, 148). For a Tangkhul, land and its associated resources are sacred and need to be approached with respect and reverence. Indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources was regarded as unethical.

It may also be relevant to point out that the socio-cultural and religious structures of the Tangkhul society were, and remain, in stark contrast with those of the caste Hindu society. As mentioned earlier, the existing caste system happened to be a formidable fortress the missionaries could not march through. In the case of the Tangkhul Nagas such a closely entangled caste structure was nonexistent. In fact, their social and cultural fabrics laid the way for a comparatively easy intrusion of Christian values and faith, while the same system proved to be an unfavorable ground for Hinduism (the religion of the Meiteis in the plains) to take root among them. B. C. Allen (1905, 89) wrote in this regard:

Hinduism has no attraction for the Naga. In the plains converts gravitate towards it in obedience to the law which draws the smaller body towards the greater. All men like to follow the fashion, even though it may entail considerable personal inconvenience, so year by year the animistic tribes [Meiteis] are abandoning their pork, and fowl and beer, though many a longing eye is cast upon the flesh-pots of Egypt. But in the hills no distinction is conferred by Hinduism, and nothing less than a strong desire for social advancement would induce a Naga to adopt a religion which would impose on him so many troublesome restrictions.

To a large extent, the pre-existing beliefs system and socio-cultural patterns of the native people, being compatible with the values and ideals of Christian faith, formed a perfect foundation upon which the bricks of Christianity were erected. If Christianity believes in the hereafter life, so does the traditional belief system of the Tangkhul Nagas. If Christians bury dead bodies, so do the Tangkhul Nagas. The concept of heaven in Christianity is similar to the idea of the land of the dead, or *Kaz̄eiram*, in Tangkhul religion. The god of the Christians who created heaven and earth could map onto the god of the Tangkhul Nagas who created all things under and above the earth. Most of the moral ideals and ethical lifestyle which Christianity taught were, in fact, already practiced by the natives themselves. Robin Horton (1975, 220), in his study of African cosmology, argued that the pre-existing patterns and values of a social group determine what outside cultural elements and influences to accept or reject. He suggested that the crucial variables are the pre-existing thought patterns and values, and not the external influences of Islam or Christianity, to understand the relationship between the native cosmology and their acceptance of the new faith. Similarly, the Tangkhul Nagas understood the notions of Christian cosmology in terms of their pre-existing cosmological ideas.

In fact, the missionaries, whether consciously or unconsciously, appropriated traditional religious ideas and concepts in proclaiming Christianity among the Naga tribes. Although

Pettigrew himself had not made similar remarks concerning the Tangkhul Naga religion, some missionaries admitted that the traditional religion of the Nagas laid the foundation for proclamation of Christianity. E. W. Clark (1881), the first white missionary to convert the Ao Nagas, wrote in his letter to Murdock that “the old religion of these people furnishes a splendid basis for Christianity, the fundamental ideas are there, distorted it is true, but there is much of the needful terms” (cited in Tzudir 2003, 82). Such concepts as sin (*morei* in Tangkhul) or body-soul duality (which the Tangkhuls call *phasā-manglā*), though not necessarily as elaborated as in Christianity, were familiar to the pre-Christian Nagas. Thus, Richard M. Eaton (1999, 16) argued that, “For all the condemnation of Naga ritual and social life, the missionaries were extraordinarily accommodating towards Naga doctrine and cosmology, in which and their Naga converts systemically sought points of entry of Christian terms and ideas.” It is, indeed, the perfect compatibility between the traditional religious elements of the Tangkhuls and Christianity that led to the easy acceptance of the new faith.

Discussion and Conclusion

Christianity as a religious tradition has traversed from people to people and from place to place acquiring new meanings, contents, and patterns of expression in the process. The movement and circulation of the Christian tradition accelerated along with the spread of western, European colonialism. What emerged as a minority sect of Judaism in the Middle East that bore a resemblance to Greco-Roman social and cultural ideas underwent a series of changes and adaptations. Walls (1985, 2–3, 5) identified six stages through which Christianity acquired major changes as it moved from one civilization to another. For example, the Hellenistic influence on Christianity saw the introduction of “Orthodoxy, of a canon of belief,” which was not found in the early Jewish Jesus Movement, while western Christianity introduced individualistic values into the faith. Christianity as practiced in Tangkhul society largely reflects the system of western Christianity. This is particularly true with the physical aspects of Christianity as represented in the language of scripture, the material culture of churches, and the mode of worship services. Admittedly, the patterns that Christianity took as it moved from one place to another depended on two aspects – one being the existing social and cultural patterns of the receiving society, and the other being the attitude and ideology of the missionaries responsible for introducing Christianity (to this we may add what Walls [1985, 8–9] called the “translatability” of the faith itself). The first aspect, as addressed in the article, seems to have a bearing on the rate of success during conversion activity. This aligns with the postulation of Moore (1987) who says that acculturation or transfer of socio-cultural elements from one society to another positively correlates with the “simplicity” and “consistency” or continuity of the existing patterns with the incoming ones. The attitude and ideology of the missionary, on the other hand, seems to largely influence on the forms and character of Christianity after its implantation.

Missionary activities in Japan, Thailand, Taiwan, and the Hindu regions of India were largely unsuccessful due to strong local religious and cultural resistance, and because of social incompatibility with the new religious order (Ma and Ma 2010; Alvares and Alvares 1994). Such places were receptive to missionary activities when conversion was properly and sufficiently contextualized in local taste and character. For example, Francis Xavier’s successful conversion of hundreds of Indians in 1542 was attributed to the missionary’s

emphasis on the proper contextualization of the Christian faith in an Indian socio-cultural milieu. The Indian converts retained their caste identity and customs, thus preventing them from taking on the ways of other people while remaining true to Christian faith. The Protestant missionaries, particularly the Danish mission, effectively grafted their missionary approach to suit the existing taste and form. A similar approach was followed by the early Christian missionaries in Japan and China, which ensured the sustainability of Christian movement in a rather hostile socio-cultural and political environment. Roland Allen was an Anglican missionary who strongly advocated transmission of Christianity in close harmony with the Chinese tradition (Alvares and Alvares 1994, 41). The emergent Christian community that arises from such missionary approaches is what Sigg, Pascal, and Zurlo (2016) termed as “Indigenous Christianity” – the end product is a blend of local culture and Christian tradition that is neither the exact traditional religion nor western Christianity. Thus, the community retains its social and cultural identity even as its members switched their religion.

Not all Christian missionaries followed the same approach in proselytizing native societies. These missionaries viewed at their works as part of a civilizing mission in which the native society, people, and culture were conceptualized as the antithesis of the advanced western civilization in the scheme of human social evolution. Therefore, it was felt that the “savage” needed to shed its old skin and sport the Western-tailored new social and cultural fabrics through shifting their religious allegiance from traditional religion to Christianity. Rev. William Pettigrew undoubtedly belonged to this strand of missionary, and he had all but contempt for the pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga society and its cultural elements. Pettigrew failed to differentiate between religion and culture, and what followed suit was an indiscriminate injection and absorption of western culture and the Christian tradition while simultaneously discarding their traditional social and cultural patterns. The failure to properly contextualize conversion in local forms and character gave birth to an end product that was representative of an exact replica of western Christianity – a religious phenomenon many native scholars and thinkers have lamented.

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