

Tezenlo Thong

Colonization, Proselytization, and Identity

The Nagas and Westernization in Northeast India

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ISBN 978-3-319-43933-4 ISBN 978-3-319-43934-1 (cBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-43934-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016948826

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Cover illustration: Pattern adapted from an Indian cotton print produced in the 19th century

Printed on acid-free paper

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The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Proselytization and Raising “the Savage to a Higher Level”

Abstract This chapter discusses the arrival of American missionaries who brought with them Puritan morality and inculcated it in the Naga converts. By introducing Western Christianity, then, the Nagas were westernized. Consequently, the Nagas gradually abandoned and rejected their traditional practices pertaining to folktales, music, myths, dance, ornaments, and festivals in order to put on the “garb” of Western Christianity.

Keywords Western Christianity · American Baptist missionaries · Western values · Rice beer · Polygamy · Literacy project

Nagaland has the distinction of being known as “the most Baptist state in the world.”¹ The 2011 Census records show that the state’s Christian population is 90.02 %, making it one of the most Christianized regions in the world. The non-Christian population in the state is comprised mostly of immigrants from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and other states within India. Except for a very small minority, Christianity exists as the only religion for the Nagas. As such, even those Nagas who hardly have anything to do with Christianity are likely to identify themselves as Christians, as, for instance, when filling in a form asking for an identification of a religion. Perhaps, the question that inevitably follows is, “How did this landlocked and obscure region come to be highly Christianized?” In this chapter, we will explore the history of Western Christian missions among

the Nagas and how Western Christianity has come to be an intricate part of the modern Naga identity.

CHRISTIANITY IN THE NAGA HILLS

On January 9, 1839, Miles Bronson, the first American missionary to come into contact with the Nagas in what is called Arunachal Pradesh today, described in his diary notes that the fear of “White” or “Company” men palpably permeated the Naga Hills. He wrote, “They were in a state of the greatest excitement at the coming of the white face, and suspected the motives I had in coming” (in Barpujari 1986: 232). The Nagas feared that he was “a servant of the *Company*,” the *Company* being the *East India Company* that had first set foot in northeast in 1832 in search of tea plants and other natural resources. In fact, Bronson arrived as a result of an invitation extended to missionaries by Francis Jenkins, the British administrator of Northeast India.

In 1834, 2 years after the first British incursion into the Naga Hills, Jenkins sent a letter to his compatriots at the Serampore Baptist Mission (near present-day Kolkata), inviting them to help evangelize and “civilize” the native inhabitants (Albaugh 1935). The mission in turn conveyed the need to the American Baptist missionaries in Burma. Jenkins’s letter was accompanied by a promised generous contribution of Rs. 1000 for the cause of missions and an additional Rs. 1000 for a printing press. The Board of American Baptist Missions enthusiastically responded to the request. As a result, in September 1835, two missionaries from Burma arrived in Assam with their families. Among the two, one was a printer. About a year and a half later, in April 1837, Miles Bronson and Jacob Thomas too arrived with their wives (Newcomb 1859). Soon after their arrival, the Bronsons set their eyes on the Naga Hills and began preparations for work among the Nagas.

On January 7, 1839, Bronson left for Namsang with some Assamese porters and an interpreter. Upon arriving near the Naga villages, after a series of negotiations to meet with the village *ang* (governor), he and his team were happily led to a hut prepared for them by the villagers. To their dismay, however, they discovered a bit later that they were still quite a distance away from the villages. The Nagas were fearful as well as suspicious of a White man resolutely wanting to visit them. Bronson noted in his dairy record the misgivings of the Nagas: “Is not your color, your dress, your language, the same; and what person would come so far, merely to give us books and teach us religion?” (in Barpujari 1986: 234). A couple of

days later, he was permitted to come into one of the villages and then to meet the village *ang* a few days after.

Bronson’s primary goal was to prepare literature fit for teaching the Bible to the people in their vernacular. Almost a year after the first visit, he had “completed two or three elementary books” (Barpujari 1986: 237) and was now ready to set out on his second tour. On December 20, 1839, Bronson undertook his second tour with the hope that he, as his diary note shows, might “be able to communicate to them some of the truths of the gospel” (Barpujari 1986). To do so, he wrote, “I shall make an attempt to collect a few lads into school, and to translate a few select portions of scripture” (Barpujari 1986). This mission tour and the school project were generously funded by the British administration. T. C. Robertson, deputy governor of Bengal, and Jenkins contributed Rs. 200 and 500, respectively. Bronson moved to the Naga Hills with his family and his sister, Rhoda Bronson, in early 1840. However, in October of the same year, they decided to move back to Jaipur, Assam, after experiencing a series of illnesses in the family that hindered their mission work. The initiative was officially suspended the following year.

With the suspension of this first attempt to Christianize the Nagas, the next Western effort did not occur until about 30 years later. The missionaries who had been working in the plains of Assam, however, did not forget the hills whose inhabitants were thought to be “savages” and “heathens” shrouded in deep darkness. The Clarks, who were soon to become the first American Baptist missionaries to what is now called Nagaland, wrote to their mission board at home in 1871, “Tribe upon tribe of Nagas are accessible to the Gospel. It is certainly painful for us at Sibsagar to be unable to lift our eyes without seeing these hills and thinking of them who have no knowledge of Christ” (Clark 1907: 59).

The missionaries often used terms of binary dichotomy such as light and darkness or civilized and barbaric when describing the hill dwellers. Preconceived notions and perceptions are critical because they precede actions. They are not just ideas, thoughts, or worldviews; they inform and shape our actions. Having perceived the Nagas and other native inhabitants as uncivilized heathens and “demon worshipers” (Rivenburg 1887a: 85), civilizing and Christianizing the Other became “the White man’s burden.” For instance, an American missionary to the Nagas declared, “The heathen can get on without us; we cannot without the heathen. If we fail in our duty they will be in worse condition than they have been for thousands of years” (Perrine 1899: 100). Likewise,

on returning to London after a brief visit to the Naga Hills, Henry Balfour asserted in his presidential address to the British Folklore Society, “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” (1923: 13).

With that conviction, the American Baptist missionaries made their second attempt in the early 1870s to proselytize the Nagas. However, the American Baptist missions in Assam had been planning and preparing to first send Assamese converts. Godhula Brown, who was born Gendhela Barua and who had distinguished himself as an excellent singer and evangelist, arrived in the Naga Hills in 1871 with Subongmeren, who is the first known Naga convert who settled down in Assam. The following year, they took back a group of Ao Nagas to Sibsagar where the Nagas were baptized by E. W. Clark. In December 1872, Clark baptized another group in Molungkimong in the Ao Naga Hills. Thus, this baptism is believed to be the first one in Nagaland, and the Naga Baptist Church commemorates 1872 as the inception of Christianity in Nagaland.

Because of this historic ecclesial relationship with the West, the Naga church is deeply enamored by the “mother” church in the USA, and there is a saying among the Nagas that when a Naga Christian dies he or she visits the USA first before going to heaven. Thus, the impact of Western Christianity on the Nagas cannot be overemphasized. Admittedly, Christianity, per se, is not Western in its origin. However, the Christianity that came to the Nagas is a westernized version that did so much to westernize the Nagas. From the very inception, the goal of the missionaries was to Christianize the converts, which meant inculcating Christian moral values and practices as they were conceptualized and applied in the West. A pioneer American missionary among the hill tribes hoped that “under the influence of Christian civilization we look to see this people make splendid advancement” (Phillips 1887: 79). Some converts were separated from their villages and resettled in new villages or mission compounds where they were taught the “Christian” way of life by the missionaries who lived with them. For example, from *Molungkimong* (Old Molung), where the first church was founded, the Clarks separated and resettled the first converts to the newly established *Molungyimsen* (New Molung).

Today, any observer could certainly conclude that the American missionaries’ passionate desire and wish to see “Christian civilization” and “splendid advancement” take place among the Nagas have been realized. The result of the “Christian civilization” is often assumed to

The American missionaries, who came to the Nagas with the sole intent of converting the latter to Christianity, as they understood it and practiced it in the West, viewed the drinking of rice beer as “sinful.” They saw this crucial cultural practice as a major hindrance to evangelizing the Nagas and prohibited its consumption among the converts. The American missionaries strongly believed that “[t]otal abstinence from all intoxicants is required” (Clark 1907: 140). In speaking of a young Naga convert who had built his house and was ready to get married, the missionaries insisted that “he will not marry her until she promises—and practices too—to give up rice-beer drinking” (Clark 1907).

The Judeo-Christian scriptures have ample references to wine, which is the most common alcoholic beverage mentioned in the Bible. Condemnation for drunkenness seems to be unambiguous (Proverbs 23:19–21; Galatians 5:19–21). However, they do not necessarily forbid the consumption of drinks containing alcohol. On the contrary, the Scriptures contain some positive references (Psalm 104:14–15; Ecclesiastes 9:7). Probably the most oft-quoted example is where Jesus is said to have changed water into wine at a wedding party (John 2:1–11). If the use of wine was part and parcel of the biblical culture, why did the missionaries forbid its consumption among the converts in cultures where beer or wine was integral to the people’s way of life?

More than a biblical concept or practice, once again, the teaching of total abstinence from and revulsion against alcohol was culturally rooted in the American Christianity of that time (Thong 2014). The American missionaries came to the Nagas during and following tumultuous times in US history. Due to unprecedented cultural and social changes, caused by upheavals such as the American Revolution, the Civil War, industrialization, and urbanization, alcoholic drinks were being widely used and abused in America (Keller 1979). Just as drugs became symbols of rebellion, riots, crimes, and social unrests in the 1960s, alcoholic drinks were being commonly perceived as responsible for widespread social unrests and crimes in the society of those days. Also, like recreational drugs in most part of the USA today, alcoholic drinks remained illegal in those times.

As such, current debate on the high rate of incarceration among drug offenders in the USA is reminiscent of alcohol-related imprisonments during the Prohibition Era. For instance, in the state of Massachusetts, one report mentioned that “ninety out of every hundred persons committed to prison, were intemperate” (Brace 1882: 435). Thus, in reaction

to the perceived widespread evils related to alcohol, the temperance movement, which was deeply rooted in American Protestantism, evolved into the prohibition movement that demanded from the state and federal governments an outright prohibition of alcohol. This was in spite of the fact that “Judaism has never had any theological issue with alcohol,” argues Garrett Peck. The idea that Jesus abstained from drinking wine, according to Peck, was promoted by advocates of the temperance movement in order “to justify their political campaign to ban alcohol, which ultimately resulted in Prohibition (1920–1933)” (2013: 1). The missionaries, as people of their time and culture, brought with them this prohibitionist attitude of revulsion against alcoholic drinks and forbade the native Naga converts to drink rice beer.

These are just a couple of examples of how Christianity arrived with Western-perceived notions of evil or sin despite having no credible bases in the Judeo-Christian Bible. In fact, the practice of polygamy and the use of alcoholic drinks were both common in the Bible, and we find no clear evidence for prohibition of either one. And yet, the missionaries enforced these and other westernized “Christian” teachings and practices even as they propagated their religious faith. In other words, Western Christianity and Western morality, ideas, values, and practices often went hand in hand and served to westernize the non-Western world.

THE MISSIONARIES AND LITERACY PROJECTS

The role of the missionaries in translating the Bible into Naga languages has been significant in transforming a once nonliterate people into a literate society. The Nagas have come to rely almost solely on the Bible, an ancient literature, for their religious and ethical debates, formation, and conduct. The Bible and its associated literature imported from the West have come to play a large part in shaping the beliefs and conduct of the Nagas.

From the very beginning, the missionaries looked down on the Nagas due to the absence of books or writing in the latter’s culture. Consequently, through the power of writing, the missionaries hoped to appeal to and reshape the minds of the Nagas. For example, Miles Bronson appealed to Naga leaders to permit him to visit their villages on the basis of offering them literacy. He entreated them to allow him to come with “the first two books printed in the Naga language” and told them that, with the printed books, “it could now no longer be said that the Nagas had no