



CHRISTIANITY'S CULTURAL INFLUENCE: A STUDY OF CHAKHESANG NAGA SOCIETY

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Abstract: The Chakhesang Naga people, residing in the Phek district, offer a captivating narrative of cultural evolution intertwined with the growth of Christianity. This paper delves into the intricate tapestry of their history, specifically examining the profound impact of Christianity on the Chakhesang Naga culture, and how this faith has converged with and modified the traditional cultural identity of this resilient community. This paper traverses on religious and cultural syncretism, illustrating how traditional Naga beliefs and practices have adapted within the Christian context. Specifically, this paper focuses on the Chakhesang Naga people as a compelling testament to the resilience of indigenous cultures, highlighting their ability to embrace change while preserving their core values and identity.

Key Words: Chakhesang Nagas, indigenous religion, christianity.

INTRODUCTION

The Chakhesang Naga tribe is one of the 17 officially recognized tribes of Nagaland, nestled within the northeastern part of India. Nagaland is a place where tradition and modernity coexist and where the intricate fabric of cultural identity has been woven over the decades. It is a land where the echoes of ancestral beliefs reverberate in harmony with the rising hymns of Christianity, a phenomenon that has significantly transformed the social and cultural landscape of the indigenous Naga community. The Chakhesang Naga belongs to the Mongoloid race. They are a Tibeto-Burman people whose language falls in the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family (Lohe, 2011). The Chakhesang Naga people inhabit the geographically distinct Phek district, known as the land of tradition. The region has a rich history deeply rooted in its indigenous traditions, folklore, and rituals. The Chakhesang Naga people, like many other Naga tribes, had their own unique belief systems and cultural practices that were an integral part of their identity. These traditions were closely tied to their agrarian way of life, rituals related to agriculture, and a profound connection with the natural world. However, the arrival of Christianity in the region marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Chakhesang Naga people. With the advent of Christian missionaries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a profound religious transformation began to unfold. Over time, a significant portion of the Chakhesang Naga population converted to Christianity, leading to profound changes in their religious, social, and cultural spheres. The present day Chakhesang Nagas consists of three sub-tribes, Chokri, Khezha and Poumai Chakhesangs speaking the Poula or sapuh dialect. (Yekha-ii & Marak, 2021).

This paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the growth of Christianity in the Chakhesang Naga region and its far-reaching impact on the cultural identity of the Chakhesang Naga community. The objective is to shed light on the intricate process through which a new religious belief system, Christianity, converged and interacted with the deeply ingrained traditional practices of the Chakhesang Naga people. By delving into this religious and cultural convergence, this paper aims to uncover the multifaceted ways in which Christianity has left its indelible mark on the Chakhesang Naga society.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The significance of this study lies in its ability to contribute to a broader understanding of cultural transformation in the context of religious diffusion. It offers a unique lens through which to explore how indigenous communities adapt and evolve when introduced to external belief systems. By examining the Chakhesang Naga experience, we gain insights into the complex dynamics of cultural preservation, adaptation, and syncretism, which have relevance not only in the Northeastern region of India but also in global discussions about the interaction of faiths and cultures. This paper is not only an academic endeavor but also a celebration of cultural diversity and a tribute to the resilience of the Chakhesang Naga people in the face of profound change. It is believed that this study will contribute to a richer understanding of the cultural tapestry of the Chakhesang Naga region and serve as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and all those interested in the complex interplay of faith and identity in diverse societies.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE CHAKHESANG NAGA REGION

The emergence and growth of Christianity in the Chakhesang area are woven into a complex fabric of historical events and cultural transformations. In the annals of Chakhesang Naga history, the year 1895 stands as a watershed moment when the seeds of Christianity were first sown in the fertile soil of Chozuba village. Today, this village is rightfully recognized as "the Jerusalem of the Chakhesang Nagas," serving as the epicenter from which Christianity radiated throughout the region. (Thingo 2000)

The genesis of Christian faith in Chozuba can be traced to the fateful journey of Swuzumo and Posonyi, who embarked on a barter expedition to Kohima. In the capital, they encountered the gospel through their hosts, Sieliezhu and Lhousietsu. Sieliezhu, along with other Angami evangelists, would later venture to Chozuba, paving the way for the first Christian fellowship in the Chakhesang area.

The fledgling Christian fellowship, led by Ngakhra, Huluyi, and Swuzumo as its first converts, initially worshiped under a makeshift shelter crafted from bamboo poles and mats. Sundays were counted using twigs, with the seventh twig signifying the sacred day (Demo1995). Sunday gatherings often centered on discussions of the afterlife and the promise of heaven, where labor would be obsolete, and aging a distant memory. These early Christians faced resistance from a majority that clung to traditional beliefs, enduring harsh words and intimidation. To find respite from the antagonism, they shifted their meeting place, alternating between Ngakhra's and Swuzumo's homes. As the small fellowship expanded, the dream of having a dedicated church materialized. The realization of this dream came to fruition when Suluho and Lhutsuve returned after their education. The first church in the Chakhesang area was consecrated by Rev. Rivensburg at Chozuba village, and the two young men were commissioned by the American missionary to carry out evangelistic work in the region (Dozo, 1978)

Sare, a convert from Chizami, joined Suluho and Lhutsuve as a traveling preacher, forming a pioneering trio that would evangelize the entire Chakhesang area. They preached at social gatherings and homes, delivering the gospel in folk tunes as they traversed from village to village. Their tireless efforts bore fruit as churches gradually sprang up, with Yoruba church, Phek church, Losami church, and Chizami church among the early establishments.

The Kohima Mission Field initially oversaw the Chakhesang area until 1949. Despite initial resistance from the Kohima District Council Fellowship, the increasing Christian population and church membership led to the establishment of the Chakhesang Council Centre in Phek in 1949, with Rev. M. Savino as the inaugural Field Director. The inauguration year marked 52 churches and nearly 4000 Christians. However, challenges arose, including the tragic loss of the second Field Director, Pelesato Chase, and the occupation of the Chakhesang Christian Centre by the Indian Army. Political unrest forced a temporary relocation to Chizami, with Mesetsolo as the third Field Director. Eventually, the Centre returned to Phek, led by Rev. Duporu Vasa as the fourth Field Director. Amidst persistent political turmoil, the Centre found a permanent home in T. Chikri Pfutsero in 1961, becoming known as the Chakhesang Baptist Church Council T. Chikri Pfutsero. (Losou, 2000) By 1961, the Christian community had grown to 12,144 individuals, including 4202 baptized members.

This historical context sets the stage for our exploration of how the growth of Christianity profoundly impacted the cultural identity of the Chakhesang Naga people, a story rich with cultural, religious, and societal transformation.

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL SYNCRETISM

In the Chakhesang Naga region, the coexistence of traditional Naga beliefs and the Christian faith has given rise to a unique form of religious syncretism. This phenomenon reflects the intricate ways in which cultural and spiritual identities can intermingle, adapt, and evolve over time. The Chakhesang Naga people, like many indigenous communities, have faced the challenge of reconciling their age-old customs and rituals with the doctrines and practices introduced by Christianity. In the past, the Chakhesang Nagas, like other Naga tribes, practiced animism as their traditional belief system. This belief system was known as "*Ranalii*" among the Poumais and "*Medanyi*" among the Khezhas (Yekhau & Marak, 2021) while among the Chokris it is known as *Tsana*. Within this belief system, they held various beliefs, including the idea of supernatural spirits residing within inanimate objects like stones. They recognized the presence of both benevolent spirits that provided protection and malevolent spirits that could cause harm or take lives.

At its inception, Christianity found itself in a delicate dance with the deeply entrenched "Indigenous religion." This preexisting belief system harbored practices considered prestigious, yet paradoxically shrouded in darkness. Notably, headhunting was venerated as a means to accrue power and fertility for the village, while establishing dominance among neighboring communities. Warriors who returned with more heads were celebrated as heroes. Equally significant were the "genna" days, observed to ward off calamities and misfortunes, a practice woven into the fabric of daily life. Within the Chakhesang Naga society, traditional Naga beliefs were deeply intertwined with the cycles of agriculture, the natural world, and reverence for the spirits. Rituals and ceremonies were performed to ensure bountiful harvests, protect against malevolent spirits, and seek guidance from the benevolent spirits. These practices, rooted in a profound connection to the land and the spirits that inhabited it, were integral to the Naga cultural fabric.

With the advent of Christianity, Chakhesang Naga individuals and communities faced a profound choice: to embrace this new faith or to maintain their traditional practices. The result was a dynamic and ongoing process of negotiation between the old and the new. The Chakhesang Naga people found ways to incorporate elements of their traditional beliefs into their Christian worship, creating a unique blend of spirituality that speaks to their heritage while acknowledging their newfound faith. The process of cultural adaptation within the Christian context is particularly evident in various aspects of Chakhesang Naga life. Traditional rituals associated with agriculture and seasonal cycles, once dedicated to spirits, have often been reinterpreted to align with Christian principles. For instance, ceremonies that were originally intended to appease the spirits of the land might now be seen as expressions of gratitude to a Christian God for a good harvest.

Furthermore, traditional music and dance have found new expression within the Christian context. Folk tunes and traditional instruments are employed in Christian worship services, infusing these religious gatherings with a distinctly Naga cultural flavor. Similarly, the intricate Naga weaving and craftsmanship that were once reserved for traditional attire and artifacts are now often employed in the adornment of church sanctuaries and religious dresses. In this process of cultural adaptation, Chakhesang Naga identity has not been erased but has evolved to embrace both traditional and Christian elements.

The result is a rich blend of culture and faith, where the past and present coexist harmoniously. While some may view this syncretism as a challenge to the purity of religious belief, it can also be seen as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the Chakhesang Naga people in the face of profound cultural change.

This section below will further delve into specific examples of how traditional Naga beliefs and cultural elements have merged or adapted within the Christian context, illustrating the complex and nuanced relationship between religion and culture in the Chakhesang Naga region.

THE PRACTICES THAT WERE DISCONTINUED

Head Hunting: Head-hunting, an ancient cultural practice was also practiced among the traditional Naga society. The belief was that offering human heads at the house of the priest would ensure the well-being and growth of the village. Moreover, head-hunting served as a means of trophy collection, with warriors gaining honor and prestige for securing more heads. In addition to pride and honor, head-hunting wars had a broader societal impact. If one village was defeated, it would be required to pay taxes to the victorious villages, leading to the dominance of powerful villages over the defeated ones. This practice, once considered an ancient cultural glory, eventually came to be regarded as morally reprehensible and was subsequently discontinued. (Lasuh, 2000).

Immorality: The Chakhesang people once had a tradition that celebrated men who had been intimate with multiple women. Those who had such experiences were elevated to hero status and adorned themselves with distinctive attire, including *kilts adorned with sea-shells, thread necklaces, bracelets, and decorative robes* (Lasuh, 2000), all of which symbolized honor within their society. However, as Christianity took root in the Chakhesang Naga region, these practices came under scrutiny and were eventually considered immoral. With the influence of Christian teachings, such traditions were deemed incompatible with the new faith's moral values and were consequently discontinued.

THE PRACTICES THAT CONTINUE

Folksongs: The Chakhesang Nagas possessed a treasure trove of folk music, expressed through *li* (folksongs) and played on *tati* or *libuh*, a one-stringed bamboo instrument. However, during the early days of Christianity these traditional musical forms faced rejection due to their perceived licentious content, which did not align with the principles of the newfound faith. Yet, one notable figure, Sare or Etshiru, the first convert from Chizami, embarked on a remarkable journey of cultural and religious fusion. He ingeniously infused Christian gospel lyrics into the traditional music, thereby creating a unique and harmonious blend. His most renowned creation, 'Your work is your witness' (*N Mhatho su N Zhapou*), is emblematic of this creative synthesis. In the contemporary era, the melodies of these ancient folk tunes have found a new home within the walls of the Church. They are now employed as a form of worship infused with Christian lyrics, illustrating the resilient spirit of the Chakhesang Nagas in adapting their cultural heritage to harmonize with their Christian faith.

Traditional Dresses: The Chakhesang people continue to use their traditional clothing. Some of the most symbolical ones are;

Thüpickhu/ Thsüketsüira:

In days of old, the act of hosting a feast in the Chakhesang Naga tradition was a grand gesture marked by a lavish spread of meat and rice beer. Such a feast was no small undertaking, often costing the prospective host several years of diligent labor and thrift in preparation for the grand event. It was a testament to one's wealth, generosity, and social standing within the community.

The Thüpickhu, a magnificent shawl, holds a special significance in this cultural narrative. It stands as an emblem of prestige and honor, bestowed upon the affluent host who had offered a feast of great merit. The origins of this esteemed tradition carry a heartwarming tale—A *Chakhesang lady is believed to have conceptualized the idea of weaving this prestigious shawl for her brother as a gift during the occasion of her brother's performing the feast of merit* (Chakhesang Women Welfare Society).

In the contemporary landscape, the tradition endures with a modern twist. Those who have the privilege of hosting feasts, particularly during the festive season of Christmas within their respective villages, earn the right to don this cherished shawl. As a symbol of both tradition and evolving cultural expressions, the Thüpickhu continues to reflect the enduring spirit and cultural heritage of the Chakhesang Naga people.

Rüzakhü (Therükadiera)

The esteemed privilege of wearing the shawl is a moral right earned by those who exemplify the essence of generosity and communal goodwill. This honor is reserved for the affluent individual who not only distributes meat known as *Sese* in Khuzha and *muza* in Chokri, (Lasuh, 2000) to the entire village but also hosts another grand feast that encompasses the entire community. The shawl itself is a radiant testament to this tradition, with its pure white hue symbolizing the essence of the feast. This shawl is meticulously crafted by stitching together four separate pieces using porcupine quills and a robust thread formed by twisting

several strands together. The choice of white as its color signifies the rich and fatty portions of meat, while the thread represents the large intestines of animals. Collectively, the shawl and its components embody the virtues of magnanimity and the eagerness to contribute positively to the well-being of others. It stands as a symbol of the generous heart and the willingness to engage in acts of kindness that benefit the entire village, reinforcing the cherished values that underpin the Chakhesang Naga cultural fabric.

Tüsüne (Chiinamenie)

The black kilt embellished with three or four rows of sea shells holds a special place in Chakhesang Naga culture, symbolizing distinct aspects of honor and festivity. In olden days, the version with three rows of shells was typically reserved for the ordinary warriors, signifying their status within the community. In contrast, the four-rowed variant carried greater significance, being bestowed upon individuals who had accomplished remarkable feats such as taking heads or orchestrating a feast of merit. However, as times have evolved, so too has the purpose of wearing this adorned kilt. In contemporary Chakhesang Naga society, it has transformed into a symbol of festivity. It is no longer confined to those with specific accomplishments but rather serves as an emblem of communal celebration, worn during joyous occasions and festive gatherings. This evolution reflects the adaptability of tradition within the dynamic landscape of cultural expression among the Chakhesang Naga people.

Monolith Erection: The Chakhesang people held a longstanding tradition of carrying gigantic stones from afar and erecting them along roadways or at significant locations. This practice was often undertaken by affluent individuals as a testament to their generosity, with each monolith representing the number of times they had hosted feasts for the entire village. Over time, the practice of erecting monoliths has evolved, taking on a new significance in relation to the Church. Nowadays, monoliths are commonly used to commemorate important events associated with the Church, such as Jubilees. These stone sentinels stand as enduring markers of pivotal moments within the religious community, bridging the past and present while symbolizing the continued legacy of tradition and commemoration among the Chakhesang people.

Festivals: The Chakhesang people continue to uphold their traditional festivals, although many of the rituals associated with these celebrations have evolved or been abandoned. Among the notable festivals are:

Thürinye/Rünye (Harvest Festival): This festival, celebrated in November and December, pays homage to the bountiful harvest season.

Sükrünye/Tekrünye (Purification Festival): Occurring in January-February, this festival centers on the purification of both men and women, signifying a spiritual renewal.

Tükhanye/Chükhenye (Millet Harvest Festival): Celebrated in July-August, this festival marks the millet harvest and is a time of communal rejoicing. (Lasuh, 2000)

In earlier times, these festivals featured the offering of animals to the spirits, with blood being ceremoniously sprinkled and a piece of meat wrapped in banana leaves placed on the house's roof as a prayer to the spirits. Today, the animals sacrificed during these festivals have taken on a different role—they serve as the focal point of feasting and merriment. This evolution in festival practices reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporary cultural expressions among the Chakhesang people.

CONCLUSION

In tracing the remarkable journey of the Chakhesang Naga people, we have uncovered a narrative of transformation, resilience, and the harmonious coexistence of tradition and change. The growth of Christianity in the Chakhesang Naga region has not merely marked a religious transition but has intricately woven itself into the cultural fabric of this vibrant community. Christianity's advent brought about significant shifts in belief systems, causing some traditional practices to be discontinued or reimagined within the Christian context. The abandonment of practices such as headhunting, the celebration of sexual exploits, and the offering of animals to spirits reflects a profound evolution in values and ethics, guided by the teachings of Christianity. The infusion of Christian gospel lyrics into traditional folk music, the adaptation of cultural symbols within Christian worship, and the transformation of festivals into celebrations of feasting and merriment showcase a community's ability to embrace change while preserving its core values and sense of self. They remind us that identity is not static but is shaped by the winds of change, yet rooted in the

enduring values that define who we are. The enduring spirit of the Chakhesang Naga people remains a testament to their ability to navigate the complexities of cultural transformation while upholding the essence of their identity.

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