



# Impact of Christianity on Naga Culture

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## Abstract:

The British rule marked the advent of Christianity, western education and administration, resulting in the social and cultural and economic transformations of the Nagas. The emergence of Christianity and modern education has a strong effect on Naga culture. The consequent introduction of modern education brought about drastic and significant change in the social, cultural, political, economic and religious life of the Nagas. It marked the end of a long period of isolation and the beginning of a new age. Their cordial relations and spread of the new faith, establishment of churches and missionary schools are the historic events, that changed the traditional culture. It opened a new way for destroying Naga's age-old cultural and social values. Christianity flourished and had abiding impact on the cultural life of the Nagas, as the harbingers of peace and progress. Through their teachings and preaching they changed the vengeful and villainous customs of the Nagas with the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. Thus, it ushered the Nagas into a new era, an era of peace, freedom, security, progress and stability in the life of the people. The arrival of Christian missionaries in Nagaland was the significant chapter in the history of Naga people. Christianity changed Naga society, socially and spiritually and the life of the people has been transformed in the process of diffusion, accumulation, adoption and assimilation of western ideology and beliefs. The spread of Christianity brought changes in Naga society because the Nagas are community-oriented people with their social structure on the biases of the family, clan and village system. The missionaries were the harbinger of change in the life of the Nagas and their culture. Christianity encourages individualistic attitudes whereas the Nagas were a custom of communal life.

Keywords: Culture, Naga, tradition, Christianity, Change

Christianity came to Nagaland towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the most significant era in the history of Christianity in Nagaland was inaugurated with the arrival of American Baptist missionaries. Before the advent of Christianity into the Naga soil, the Nagas were animist. The animism practiced by the early Nagas is defined as the policy and concept of the spirit and soul. The strong belief and practice focused all phases

of their culture, tradition and custom. The initial response of the Nagas to Christianity was largely aggressive. But it was a period of transformation among the Nagas not only to the religious faith but also the society. British administrators thought that the conversion to Christianity and spread of education through missionaries will lead to their development. When the head of the family, clan, or village became a Christian, it was their duty to reach out to the people whom he or she led. It helped for the rapid spread of Christianity among the Nagas. According to M.M. Thomas, for the tribal people Christianity came as a liberator from 'spiritual and social demons'. In making the pagans Christians, the mission also makes them real human beings, and in establishing the Kingdom of God among them, implants true culture. According to Elwin, 'Conversion to Christianity has made other changes: the stress on personal salvation has introduced a new individualism in the place of the former community spirit'.

Contribution of Christianity towards the process of modernization of the Nagas is also momentous. In the words of Sanyu, "if one responsible dynamic factor were to be singled out for an overall change in the life of the Nagas, it would undoubtedly be the introduction of Christianity among them". Christianity was an influential mediator for the Social change through education, health care, development, technical education etc. The acceptance of Christianity brought changes in the other aspects of their life like festivals, organization of village, life-cycle beliefs and practices, personality development and social life, ideals and aspirations, dance, dormitory, religious status of women, economic life, health and hygiene and also changes in the realm of ideas and attitudes. Christianity brought over all changes in various factors like education, modernization, equality of sex and girls' education, greater flexibility to new situations, a better civic sense, and a higher level of aspiration. Christianity trains a person to a large scope and led to the western education and a new outlook to have network with other parts of the country with self-confidence. Christianity is one of the oldest forces of cultural change among the modern forces. Some of the Impacts of Christianity are:

#### **i). Social Impact:**

As Inato points out, the initiative of western Christian missionaries and the British administration in the Naga Hills is described by many as "Two sides of a coin", as they worked in combination with each other for the firmness of the region. The overview of British Colonial administration attached with encouragement of Christian Missionaries brought out radical change and transformed the life in the hills. Moreover the level of economic, political and social uncertainty caused by calamities and constant warring, headhunting, slavery maintenance of social status, the absence of an integrated nation, suspicion, including many people were looking for peace and authenticity. When missionaries came with medicine, care and education, it became a source of attraction to the Nagas whose lives were primitive, inexperienced and in comparative dread. The monotonous way of life in the hills, was comforted by organizing feasts, festivals and observations of various genna. The life and culture of the Nagas would have continued to be static without the encouragement of the missionaries even though they made many mistake at the beginning stage. The people who were converted to Christianity were persecuted by their clan, village and made to have a new identity. The stress on personal salvation brought a new uniqueness in the society.

The Christian missionaries brought the valuable concepts of hygiene, cleanliness, education, medicine and helped the people to abandon superstitions and those beliefs which were counter-productive in bringing suffering to people. With the disappearing of the head-hunting many a good component which was connected with it also collapsed and disappeared, like artistic life, full of motivated dances, and songs and colorful dresses, and the sign of an adventurous spirit. Christianity tried to bring a sense of diversity among the tribal and non-tribal, and insider and outsider. Intimacy is brought in the midst of diversity of tribal groups, faiths, customs and traditions. Diverse cultures encountered levels of economic, social, educational and technological developments. The extraordinary contribution of Christianity is teaching on objectivity of truth and morals against emphasis on subjective truth and norms according to one's culture. The Nagas changed their food habits and included fresh vegetables, fruits, pulses etc. in additions to their diet of rice, millet, taro and occasional meat. The consumption of milk which was a taboo in the past has become popular especially among the children. The gradual extension of British control over the Nagas, the introduction of the inner line regulation in 1873, and the promulgation of the gospel by the American Christian missionaries, efficiently checked the other religious impacts within the Naga society.

According to Sinha, "Christianity has provided the tribal Christians with a new sense of identity, a window to the modern world and an affiliation to the larger Christian world religion". The church has concerned itself with the Nagas to a deep communion of humanity and the wealth of modernism. The church is deep-rooted in cultural setting to provide intellectual interpretation of the Christian faith and a proper relationship with new progresses in society. After the coming of the Christianity the festivals are different from what they were in the past. Traditional festivals are observed but not with great gaiety but without traditional rites and rituals. Christianity has a powerful impact upon the lives of the Nagas. The lives of Nagas were in transitional Phase, by the arrival of the missionaries – the nature of dress, the institution of marriage, the social coordination, and new celebration of festivities. But it is rational to believe that Nagas life and culture would have remained stagnant without the guidance of the missionaries, even though they made lot of mistake at the initial stage but they constrained certain practices in Naga culture which is outdated and contributed as social waste.

## **ii). Educational Impact**

The indigenous education of the Nagas can be categorized into two types- Firstly, the family education imparted in the kitchen hearth. Secondly, the Social education given in the bachelor's dormitory. Traditionally the Nagas lived in self-contained villages and there was no organization to deal with the needs of the tribe as a whole. The arrival of Christian missionaries spread through education the enlightenment of knowledge. They introduced education and used Roman script to make communication easier with Nagas as well as with the outside world. In the past 200 years, Christianity has been one of the primary mediators of social, economic, and cultural transformation in the Naga society. The most important contribution of Christianity is related to education, formal, non-formal and technical. Many central and state universities were started. The impact of education in the Naga society could break the traditional obstacles and helped for the introduction of western education. Christianity brought modern English education and it was the

vehicle of modernization. Education brought by the Christian missionaries helped for the removal of many superstitious and anti-social practices. As a result of education the Nagas began to distinguish their past and future and chose to progress their professions in various branches of knowledge. The seed of modern education was sowed by CD King and Rivenburg. This education opened many opportunities for various professions by the Nagas and many entered the Civil Service in the British India Government. This exposure to the outside world broadened their outlook and they carried new ideas of developing their cultivation, various arts and crafts and exploitation of the forest resources.

The introduction of English language in educational institutions and inter-church activities served as a common means of communication. Christianity helped for providing a script for many oral tribal languages and essential linguistic infrastructures like grammars, dictionaries and basic literature for the development of local languages. The spread of western education has encouraged them to perform and participate in religious activities of the past without cooperating with Christian faith and values. The traditional beliefs and practices, which the Christian Nagas had abandoned in order to be 'saved' have the tendency of being revitalized by the converts themselves. The spread of education broadened their mind, making them curious about new knowledge and technology. It helped them to adopt new style of life, and made them to oppose their ancient culture and civilization. Education emerged as an important factor in the process of modernization. The educated people were influenced by the modern ideas and it gave them better standard of life. According to Horam "The constant feuds and head-hunting of these people were cut short by the new doctrine based on love and brotherhood. Apart from this, The Naga literature before the coming of Christianity was purely oral, now they have been written..." The Naga literature has been developed, fostered biblical knowledge, spirituality, growth in academics and modern intellect, and recording of cultural heritage - customs, traditions, myths and legends.

The impact of western education and Christianity led to steady change in the outlook. It helped in building up a sense of belonging among different tribes and gave a common Naga uniqueness. The western education included scientific knowledge which enabled the people to abandon superstitions, magic power and sorcery for healing of sickness. The Christian missionaries felt the necessity of introducing education to transform the Nagas to modernity and progress. As P. Sema says- The Christian missionaries interfered in the social and cultural practices of the Nagas to a far greater extent than the government did. Their contribution to literature and the education system not only transformed the cultural ethos of the Nagas but also led them to a new dimension in a valued system of life. Thus, they brought new idea of liberation, transformation, and a revolution in science and technology, economy, politics, culture, and literature and made them available to all the people. It has been imposed through different agencies like – education, literature, medical care and mission, and voluntary and charity organization. There were three channels of instruction in the early stage, local vernaculars, Assamese and English because of different tribal languages. Thus, the missionaries translated the books into Roman script and encouraged the students for study providing scholarships and stipends. The modern education had the effect of the creation of their identity,

oneness, inter-tribal relationship and the increase of inter-tribal marriages and the living standard of the people changed.

### iii). Cultural Impact:

The word 'culture' has been defined differently by authors as it incorporates the complete life system of man. It rotates around belief, language, social life, and attitude of man. In culture one has his identity, and in his culture he discovers the meaning of life. "It is a sum total of ideas, images, myths, language, laws, values and institutions that express a given society's analysis of itself and of the world as it knows it". Actually culture is a way of life and is developed through learning. Religion and culture are inter-linked. When a new religious perspective is presented to a culture, the socio-cultural life of the people is assured to undergo an alteration. More the fascination of religion into the cultural life of the people better would be the God-experience of the people. Christianity encouraged inculturation from the beginning. Christianity has brought modern education in the later part of 19<sup>th</sup> century that transformed the Nagas Society and Culture. It is good to quote the words of Pruet by Kumar that "the missions have caused fatal injury and damage to the indigenous culture of Nagaland". According to Joseph Thong, every Naga believes today that, the Christian religion for him is religion from uncertain to certainty from darkness to light, from death to eternal life, damnation to salvation. It brought changes in the shifting of life from head-hunting to peaceful relationship and disappearance of the Feast of Merit, which is centered round their traditional life. The arrival of Christianity among the Nagas brought changes in the essential, Social and religious transformation among them.

According to Inato, the British administration and Christian missionaries rejected the social patterns, cultural mechanism, and political functions and procedures, and no functional replacements were provided in their place. This created a void in the lives of the Nagas living at that time and even so, more to the future generations causing discontentment with their own cultural and social needs. The informal education which is received in the dormitories of the past is now given by the church. Christianity has changed the material culture of the Northeast, and the traditional social practices prohibited, like sexual freedom before marriage, traditional practices of divorce and multiple spouses, the taking of opium, drinking intoxicants and generally humiliating place given to women. The missionaries were keen to learn indigenous languages and the church served as a model for inter-tribal bond. They tried to promote and preserve indigenous cultures and promoted the preservation of cultural artifacts and the establishment of museums in different parts of northeast. Traditional medicines were promoted to preserve for the healthcare. The village people were influenced by the new culture brought by the missionaries. The modern education brought many changes in the life style of the Nagas, in their cooking system, food items, pattern of house building and house decoration, matters relating to personal hygiene and community health awareness, plastic mugs and plates have taken the place of the old bamboo cups and wooden plates. The main change has occurred in the shifting of life from head-hunting to peaceful relationship and vanishing of the Feast of merit, because the life of Nagas centered round these two practices.

**iv) Political Impact:**

The establishment of British rule and the subsequent entry of the American Baptist missionaries during the last decades of the 19th century, the Nagas lived in isolation in their village - state. They had their own different social life, manners of living, laws and customs and method of governance. The village was the main political and social structure that made them strong and united to fight against the outside forces. Christianity brought the introduction of new political structure and laws, the setting up of new administrative headquarters in towns, new economic order and new fiscal practices brought the Naga society near to the threshold of modernity and served as tools to transform the traditional Naga society into a modern society. It helped the Nagas to be aware of their rights and duties in society and political realization, desire for political leadership in local and national bodies. Respect them, either by heredity or through an informal but transparent process. The opposition and the threat in the beginning stage of Christianity in Naga hills by the non-Christian leaders did not abandon the idea of the missionaries, they kept on preaching and showed them love, patience and tolerance.

**v). Economic impact**

The impact of Christianity on tribal culture. The British always expected that the educational and literary determinations of the missionaries in the Naga Hills would encourage peace and economic prosperity among the tribes. Christianity helped for the modern method of farming, technology, a sense of saving helped for the economic development of the Nagas. Christianity initiated for the infrastructural developments like buildings for educational institutions, churches, hospitals and cultural centers even in the remote villages to preserve the traditional culture of the Nagas. The riches of a person were evaluated in terms of his land, cattle, granaries and domestic animals etc. But now it is assessed in the amount of his deposits in the Banks, children's education, number of building in towns, number of vehicles owned, T.V, Refrigerator, cooking gas stove, tape-recorder and stereo, household modern equipment, number of shops and hotels, mini mills and factories owned by a person and economic tree plantation in rural areas. Most of the villages in Nagaland are covered with church and school.

**vi). Religious Impact:**

Traditional Naga religion is not missionary, while Christianity is missionary in nature. There is a special call to proclaim the message of Christianity so as to be an agent of change in the world. Michael Oppitz pointed out that it is almost 135 years now, so every social, cultural, economic and even the political system is completely changed by the Christian pattern. Even a secular meeting is being conducted after first praying and reading the bible. Christianity ushered in a transformation from animistic traditions based on superstitious practices to a more orderly society where the guiding principle was no longer that of natural human desires but based rather on the laws of God and love for one's fellow man. The missionaries were against the practice of headhunting and animal sacrifice and other superstitious practices. Most of the activities originated from Naga religion and customary practices, and some of the practices were banned like inter-village or inter-group feuds, wars and head-hunting and brought peace, security and serenity in the

hills. The missionaries denounced the accompanying feasting, drinking and dancing, but it affected the rich oral traditions of song, and energetic dances and lost colour and gaiety associated with cultural activities. Christian hymns have taken the place of the traditional songs. The Christian converts gave up their traditional system of worship, rituals and festivals and many of the traditional customs and institution lost their importance. The Nagas felt that Christianity would help them to preserve their identity in times of chaos caused by imperialism and colonialism.

Christianity helped the Nagas to be more and more responsive to social organization and religious faith. The missionaries were also involved in the upliftment of the poor villagers by way of providing medicines, education and teaching them about hygienic living. As a result, many Nagas were converted to Christianity and they began to perceive their cultural and religious practices such as headhunting, sacrifices of animals, observation of ceremonies as sinful. According to O. Alem, People were beginning to question the effectiveness of their age-old religious beliefs and practices. The expensive ceremonials, especially in the case of sickness, were becoming unbearably burdensome to many. Silently they were looking forward to one who would provide answers to the mystery of suffering: a deliverer from the bondage of the spirits and the judgment of God. In the absence of the message of forgiveness of God, they were living in fear of the judgment of God. The advent of the missionaries with the message of God changed their fear of satanic power and dependence on superstitious practices. Their experience of the power of God gave them true understanding of the power of God and the conceptions of demons, sin, bondage, liberation and the Kingdom of God.

### **Negative impact of Christianity on Naga Culture:**

Traditional culture, once the nerve Centre of governance and social control in the tribal traditional societies in the past, has been facing threats from various forces of modernity and post-modernity. These forces have indeed led to decadence of many such practices and many are on the verge of extinction. Many reproaches are there about Christianity but it has converted Naga society socially and spiritually through different development organizations. The aim of Christian mission, then is not to 'civilize' aboriginals in the sense of imposing on them a western way of life that is alien to them. It is rather to draw out the distinctive qualities within them and help these to grow and flower...In other words, they are concerned with the whole man and development of the whole man towards the fullest maturity he is capable of attaining. They believe that the three processes of healing the body, educating the mind, and awakening the spirit of consciousness of God, though in a sense of distinct activities, are really three inseparable processes, belonging to a greater purpose. The purpose is to make men whole and Christians are convinced that the only way which can lead men to that wholeness, is the way of Christ, according to Naughton Mac. Some of the Negative impacts of Christianity to the culture are:-

- Today, Nagas have landed in a world of cultural dilemma as they have discarded their own cultural practices and beliefs and accepted the Christian Culture. However, they are unable to go neither with the reality of Christian ethics nor with their old traditional value system. With the advent of Christianity, all their

traditional practices, customs, and cultures were considered as unchristian and inevitably they left their own beautiful rich culture. The local cultures of Nagas have greatly hurt them by accepting conversion.

- Now Christian hymns have taken place of the traditional songs. Traditional songs and dances have been an indispensable part of the Nagas, but accepting Christianity has changed that and not given importance to it.
- The words of Verrier Elwin was quoted by Maitra, that “The activities of the Baptist Mission among the Nagas have demoralised the people, destroyed tribal solidarity and forbidden the joys and feasting, the decorations and romance of communal life.” The traditional arts and crafts and culture could have been preserved and flourished by the missionaries if they had the idea of upliftment of the Naga society.
- Introduction of Christianity in Nagaland had led to the devastation of age old tribal customs and cultural values owing to the missionaries’ ignorance of the principles attached to them. Despising most of the older practices as ‘heathen’ and ‘satanic’, was something unacceptable. Many anthropologists have condemned the missionaries for lack of concern for the tribal culture.
- People were prevented from wearing even their ornaments. But this attitude has undergone a lot of change and today there is tolerance and broadmindedness among people”. Christian education, in Nagaland was also assessed for being one-sided. In the words of Longkumer, “the role of Christian education was reduced to transplant the teachings of Christianity as it was developed in the west. They ignored the native context and culture”.
- Imposition of an alien culture would separate a people from their roots and thus they tend to lose their own identity. According to Iralu “Although Christian envisaging an identity for the Nagas, they looked down on the local culture, especially the local beliefs in the same perspective as that of the British colonials”. While the Baptist missionaries prohibited much of Naga traditional and cultural life, the Catholic Church seems to have had a much better understanding as far as the allegations of culture and tradition are concerned.
- The church has encouraged indigenous songs, music, symbols and dialect in the worship. She integrates them into liturgical life of rituals, sacraments, burial services, architecture, theology, songs, etc. in as far as they fit well into the system. Cultural symbols like spear, *mithun* head, rice plate, Naga cup etc. are symbolically portrayed in places of worship and during celebrations.
- The Catholic missionaries have always encouraged the Catholics to hold on to their own folk lore and customs which were not against the spirit of one’s faith. The church has encouraged them and expressed the view that it is important and meaningful to incorporate these into practice as it would help the whole person in worship. Competitions on folklore, song and dance are often conducted to keep in touch with the tradition. Parents are encouraged to update their children with the age old valuable tradition to draw examples from. The table below illustrates the importance the Catholic Church gives to indigenous songs, music, symbols etc. in worship and also encouragement given to uphold Naga culture.
- The western Christian missionaries considered any Naga ceremony and festival or anything connected with Naga culture and custom as devilish, for example – the house beautifications with animal heads is valued as Nagas trophies of valour, and Mithun horns were a sign of their wealth. These articles of art were demolished. The wood carvings on the pillars of their houses were removed.



- The weavings with conspicuous designs and colours and the dyeing of clothes and dresses for religious ceremonies were all discouraged. Their beautiful ornaments of great artistic and human value like cowries, ivory, scarlet hair, and hornbills were all burnt as they were ornaments used for worshipping the spirits. The art of dancing and colorful social ceremonies were all given up. The beautiful art and culture of the Nagas almost fully vanished. The changes have brought a vast cultural disaster and void for future generations.
- The cultural trade mark of the Nagas were traditional music, songs and dances, they sang and performed in Morung, celebration, festivals and at home and also in the work place and in big and small informal gatherings. These songs and dances were discouraged by the missionaries since they appeared devilish and animistic to them. Thus, their culture and customs were condemned by the missionaries, so, they despised their own cultural inheritance. Haimendorf stated in his book, Christianity and their culture seemed poles apart to them, but the missionaries made few attempts to bring the two into harmony and build that which was valuable in tribal life. It created tension in the lives of the Nagas. The traditional Nagas tried to hold and preserve the indigenous culture.
- The spiritual passion and earnest dedications the missionaries started to convert people but the whole village turns against the converted person. Naga religious rights were forbidden to be practiced by them. Thus, as Christianity spread, the ancestral religion started to decline. The traditional form of Naga society was displaced. The British rule and American missionaries functioning together generated doubt and misperception among the Nagas in the early stage because of the mixture of politics and religion.
- Through education, modern agencies and Christian moral codes the missionaries shaped the religious and social face of the Nagas. It gave class division in Naga society, an organization that by no means existed in the history of Nagas and created a complex association with European countries. There were civilized countries fighting wars and killing thousands of people, still they considered Nagas as barbarous. People believed that Nagas are the agents of western culture in India and supported the Christian missionaries to separate the villages from Christians and non-Christian villages. The embracing of faith led to harassment and discrimination between them, which became oppressive and expensive for their life in the future because the missionaries did not adopt the methods of indigenization and contextualization.
- The missionaries did not fully have an understanding of the workings of Naga society and made no effort to look beyond the external. British policy of captivating the hill tribes with the aim of western advancement led to a crisis of faith, letdown with traditional values, and cultural reservation. The beliefs as a measure was promiscuity, heathenism, cruelty and illiteracy, converts were enforced to make a whole break with the tradition; they were forbidden to drink rice beers, take part in traditional singing and dancing, sleeping in the Morungs, or take part in any of the traditional co-operative activities of the community. The missionaries are even believed to have destroyed traditional objects. Many of the missionaries treated Naga culture and traditional practices as 'pagan' and 'evil' and to be prohibited.

To conclude, the new changes that grew among the Nagas helped to expand the mental horizons. The people became confused and began to suffer an identity crisis which they never had in their life. As Sanyu says, the activities of the missionaries and the British staying in the area, made the foundation for the modernization, which led to the self-reliance and economy developed as self-sufficient in the Naga society.

The American Baptist missionaries were the first who forbade taking part in tribal dances, singing tribal songs and other indigenous customs. Nagas were war-like and it was essential to erase from their minds past activities, which they considered as 'heathen', in order to make them 'civilized', and on the other hand it was their ignorance of tribal culture. The church gives importance to inculturation as an essential tool for religious life. In the words of Bishop Stephen Fernando "we Catholics have always allowed the principles so dear to Pandit Nehru to approach the tribal people with love, to preserve what is good in them, not to destroy their dances and song and joy, and at the same time to give them the advantage of civilization".

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