



Negotiating Indigeneity Through Religious Reform: Lessons from the Heraka Movement

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Abstract

Religious reform movements among indigenous communities are often interpreted as attempts to preserve traditional belief systems in the face of colonial expansion and missionary activity. While such interpretations capture an important historical dimension, they overlook the dynamic role of religious reform in reconstructing collective identities and negotiating political belonging. This article argues that the Heraka movement among the Zeme Nagas of Northeast India represents a process through which indigeneity is actively reconstituted rather than merely preserved. Drawing primarily on Arkotong Longkumer's ethnographic work alongside broader sociological and anthropological scholarship, the paper examines how the Heraka movement transformed indigenous cosmology, ritual practice, and notions of community in response to colonial intervention, Christian conversion, and postcolonial identity politics. Rather than viewing religious reform as a conservative return to tradition, the article demonstrates that the Heraka movement selectively appropriated modern organisational forms while simultaneously reaffirming indigenous distinctiveness. A comparative discussion of the Seng Khasi movement among the Khasi further illustrates that indigenous religious reform across Northeast India has emerged as a broader strategy of negotiating modernity without relinquishing cultural autonomy. The paper argues that religious reform should be understood as a sociological process through which indigenous communities redraw symbolic boundaries, reconstruct collective memory, and articulate new forms of political belonging. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary debates on indigeneity, religion, ethnicity, and nationalism in South Asia.

Keywords: Heraka, indigeneity, religious reform, Northeast India, identity, Seng Khasi, ethnicity, nationalism

Introduction

Across the world, indigenous societies have responded to colonialism, missionary expansion, state formation, and globalization through diverse strategies of adaptation and resistance. While some communities embraced religious conversion, others revitalised indigenous belief systems, often reformulating them to meet changing historical circumstances. These reform movements were seldom confined to the religious sphere alone. Rather, they transformed collective identities, redefined relations with political authority, and generated new understandings of community and belonging. Religion, therefore, became an important site through which indigenous peoples negotiated both continuity and change.

Northeast India presents one of the most compelling contexts for examining these processes. Home to remarkable ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, the region has experienced successive encounters with colonial administration, Christian missionary activity, nationalist politics, and postcolonial state-building. These encounters profoundly reshaped indigenous societies. Although Christianity emerged as the dominant religion among many tribal communities, several indigenous groups also initiated movements aimed at revitalising or reforming traditional religious practices. Such movements were not simple attempts to recover a pristine past but represented creative engagements with modernity, identity, and political belonging.

Among these, the Heraka movement occupies a distinctive position. Emerging among the Zeme Nagas during the early twentieth century under the leadership of Jadonang and later Rani Gaidinliu, the movement has frequently been interpreted either as a millenarian resistance to colonial rule or as an indigenous religious revival. While both interpretations contain elements of truth, they insufficiently capture the broader sociological significance of the movement. As Longkumer (2010) convincingly demonstrates, the Heraka movement involved a profound reconfiguration of cosmology, ritual authority, community organisation, and ethnic identity. It simultaneously challenged colonial domination, responded to Christian expansion, and negotiated emerging forms of Naga nationalism. Religious reform thus became inseparable from wider questions of identity and belonging.

This article argues that the Heraka movement should be understood as a process of negotiating indigeneity. Indigeneity is not treated here as a fixed cultural inheritance but as an evolving social and political identity continually reconstructed through historical experience. Indigenous communities do not merely preserve tradition; they reinterpret it in response to changing social realities. Religious reform becomes one of the principal mechanisms through which this reinterpretation occurs. By reformulating ritual practices, redefining cosmological beliefs, and reconstructing collective memory, reform movements simultaneously preserve continuity and produce new social identities.

The article draws upon Longkumer's ethnography while placing it in conversation with broader sociological scholarship on religion, ethnicity, and nationalism. Rather than offering another review of the Heraka movement, the paper seeks to develop a conceptual understanding of indigenous religious reform as a strategy of negotiating modernity. In doing so, it engages with theoretical insights from Durkheim (1912), Weber (1922), Anderson (1983), Asad (1993), Bourdieu (1977), Cohen (1985), and Brubaker (2004). These perspectives illuminate how religion functions simultaneously as a system of meaning, a source of symbolic boundaries, and a mechanism for producing collective identities.

The discussion is further enriched through a comparison with the Seng Khasi movement of Meghalaya. Although emerging within different historical and political contexts, both movements illustrate how indigenous societies selectively appropriate elements of modern organisation while resisting cultural assimilation. Comparing these movements demonstrates that indigenous religious reform across Northeast India represents a broader sociological phenomenon rather than isolated regional developments.

The central argument advanced here is that religious reform movements among indigenous communities should not be viewed simply as efforts to conserve tradition. Instead, they constitute dynamic projects of negotiating indigeneity through the reconstruction of symbolic boundaries, collective memory, and political identity. Religious reform thus emerges not as resistance to modernity but as an indigenous mode of engaging with it.

Religious reform and the negotiation of indigeneity: A theoretical perspective

Classical sociology has long recognised religion as one of the principal institutions through which societies organise meaning and social order. Durkheim (1912) argued that religion ultimately expresses society's collective consciousness, creating solidarity through shared symbols and rituals. Religious

ceremonies reaffirm moral communities by distinguishing the sacred from the profane. Although Durkheim's formulation has often been criticised for underestimating conflict and power, it remains valuable in demonstrating that religious transformation inevitably entails transformations in collective identity.

Max Weber (1922), by contrast, emphasised religion as a force of social change. His analysis of prophetic movements illustrated how charismatic leaders frequently challenge established religious authorities and introduce new ethical orientations capable of reshaping economic and political life. Weber's perspective provides a useful framework for understanding figures such as Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu, whose charismatic authority extended beyond ritual leadership into broader projects of social and political transformation.

Contemporary scholarship has complicated these classical perspectives by questioning universal definitions of religion itself. Asad (1993) argues that religion cannot be understood independently of historical relations of power. Colonial encounters produced modern understandings of religion that often failed to recognise indigenous cosmologies on their own terms. Consequently, many indigenous reform movements were compelled to organise themselves according to institutional forms recognisable to colonial administrations and later nation-states. Codified scriptures, formal places of worship, standardised rituals, and organised leadership frequently emerged not simply from theological developments but also from political necessity.

This insight is particularly significant in Northeast India. Indigenous religions increasingly encountered Christianity not merely as an alternative belief system but as a modern institutional religion possessing churches, written scriptures, educational institutions, and transnational organisational networks. Reform movements such as the Heraka, therefore, adopted certain institutional characteristics without abandoning indigenous epistemologies. Rather than representing cultural imitation, these adaptations reflected strategic negotiations with modern political realities.

The sociology of ethnicity further illuminates these developments. Barth (1969) famously argued that ethnic groups persist not because of static cultural content but because they continuously reproduce symbolic boundaries distinguishing themselves from others. Religious reform often becomes one of the most effective mechanisms for constructing such boundaries. Reformulated rituals, redefined moral communities, and revised cosmologies establish new distinctions between insiders and outsiders while simultaneously reinforcing internal solidarity.

The Heraka movement demonstrates precisely this process. It did not merely preserve older Zeme religious traditions; it selectively reorganised them into a coherent religious system capable of distinguishing Heraka followers from both Christian Nagas and broader Hindu influences. Religion, thus, became central to negotiating ethnic identity rather than merely expressing inherited culture.

The concept of imagined communities proposed by Anderson (1983) further suggests that communities are socially constructed through shared narratives rather than direct interpersonal interaction. Reform movements frequently generate these narratives by reinterpreting myths, histories, and collective memories. Longkumer's analysis shows that Heraka narratives concerning Tingwang, Jadonang, Gaidinliu, and the ideal community of *heguangram* provided precisely such symbolic foundations for imagining a distinct indigenous future.

Colonialism, religious reform and the reconstruction of indigenous identity: The Heraka Experience

The emergence of the Heraka movement during the early twentieth century cannot be understood independently of the profound political, economic, and cultural transformations brought about by colonial rule in Northeast India. Religious reform was not an isolated theological development but part of a wider process through which the Zeme Nagas negotiated changing relations with the colonial state,

Christian missionaries, neighbouring ethnic communities, and later the postcolonial Indian nation-state. Rather than simply preserving an endangered indigenous religion, the Heraka movement reconfigured existing beliefs and institutions to produce a new framework of collective identity capable of responding to these historical pressures.

Scholars of religious change have increasingly argued that reform movements arise during periods of structural transformation, when established social institutions are no longer able to provide adequate explanations for changing material and political realities (Weber, 1922; Eisenstadt, 2000). Such moments often generate what Anthony Wallace (1956) termed “revitalization movements” - deliberate, organised efforts by members of a society to construct more satisfying cultural systems in response to crisis. The Heraka movement fits this sociological pattern remarkably well. While grounded in indigenous cosmology, it simultaneously represented an attempt to reorganise Zeme society under radically altered historical circumstances.

Longkumer (2010) locates the origins of the movement within the failures of British colonial administration in the North Cachar Hills. Colonial officials attempted to regulate land use through administrative categories that failed to recognise the ecological logic of shifting cultivation. Restrictions on traditional agricultural practices, coupled with the encouragement of migration into Zeme territories, disrupted long-established systems of resource management and generated increasing competition over land. These economic changes produced not merely material insecurity but also social dislocation. Indigenous institutions that had historically organised agricultural life, ritual obligations, and village authority faced unprecedented pressures.

The significance of these developments extends beyond economics. Political ecology has demonstrated that transformations in resource management frequently reshape social identities because relations with land are deeply embedded within indigenous cosmologies (Escobar, 2008). For the Zeme, land was not merely an economic resource but a sacred landscape inhabited by ancestral and spiritual meanings. Colonial intervention therefore disrupted both livelihoods and symbolic worlds. Religious reform emerged as one means of restoring coherence between cosmological understandings and altered social realities.

Equally significant was the rapid expansion of Christianity across large parts of the Naga Hills during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Missionary activity introduced not only new religious beliefs but also literacy, formal education, institutional churches, and alternative systems of authority. Conversion increasingly became associated with access to modern education, administrative employment, and wider political networks (Downs, 1992). Indigenous religion, by comparison, was often represented in colonial discourse as fragmented, animistic, and lacking institutional coherence.

It is within this context that the Heraka movement should be interpreted. Rather than rejecting modernity, Heraka leaders selectively appropriated organisational forms that enabled indigenous religion to survive under new historical conditions. The movement reduced elaborate ritual obligations, discouraged economically burdensome sacrificial practices, promoted more centralised forms of worship, and emphasised the supreme deity Tingwang. These reforms made indigenous religion more institutionally coherent without abandoning its cultural foundations (Longkumer, 2010).

This process illustrates an important sociological point. Tradition is never simply inherited unchanged; rather, it is continually reconstructed through engagement with changing historical circumstances. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have shown that many traditions presented as ancient are, in fact, modern reconstructions serving contemporary political purposes. The Heraka movement exemplifies this process not because it invented tradition in an artificial sense, but because it reorganised existing religious beliefs into forms capable of addressing new political and social realities. Reform therefore represented continuity through transformation rather than preservation through isolation.

One of the movement's most significant innovations was the gradual reorganisation of Zeme cosmology around the worship of Tingwang as the supreme deity. Earlier religious practice recognised a plurality of spiritual beings associated with particular landscapes, ancestors, and ritual domains. The Heraka movement did not entirely erase this cosmological complexity but instead elevated Tingwang into a more universal divine figure around whom religious identity could be consolidated (Longkumer, 2010). This shift reflects broader processes observed in several indigenous reform movements worldwide, where diverse local cosmologies become systematised in response to encounters with world religions.

From a sociological perspective, this transformation can be understood through Bourdieu's (1977) concept of symbolic power. Religious leaders do not merely transmit inherited beliefs; they actively redefine legitimate understandings of the sacred. By reorganising cosmology, Heraka leaders established new symbolic classifications that reshaped how followers understood themselves and their collective future. Religious reform thus became a process of symbolic production through which social reality itself was reconstructed.

The emergence of written religious texts such as the *Hingde Book* further illustrates this transformation. Traditionally, Zeme religious knowledge had been transmitted orally through ritual specialists and community elders. Codification represented a significant institutional innovation. Written texts provided doctrinal consistency, facilitated wider dissemination of religious teachings, and enhanced the movement's legitimacy within a colonial environment where literacy increasingly signified civilisation and authority. Asad's (1993) critique of universal definitions of religion is particularly relevant here. The production of scripture was not merely a theological development but also reflected the political pressures of engaging with colonial institutions that privileged codified religions.

Likewise, the establishment of the *Kelumki* as a centralised place of worship marked a shift in the organisation of religious life. Sacred space became increasingly institutionalised, enabling regular collective worship that paralleled, while remaining distinct from, Christian churches. Rather than interpreting such developments as evidence of imitation, they are better understood as examples of indigenous communities appropriating organisational forms while investing them with indigenous meanings. Modern institutional structures were thus domesticated within local cultural frameworks.

The leadership of Jadonang and later Rani Gaidinliu further demonstrates how religious reform intersected with political authority. Weber's (1922) notion of charismatic authority remains particularly useful in interpreting their influence. Neither leader derived legitimacy from bureaucratic office or hereditary succession alone. Instead, authority rested upon claims to spiritual insight, prophetic leadership, and extraordinary moral capacity. Charismatic authority enabled them to mobilise followers across village boundaries while simultaneously challenging colonial domination and existing ritual hierarchies.

Yet reducing either leader to anti-colonial icons oversimplifies their historical significance. Their principal contribution lay in redefining what it meant to belong to an indigenous community undergoing rapid social transformation. Through religious reform they articulated a collective future that combined continuity with innovation. The ideal of *heguangram*, discussed extensively by Longkumer (2010), illustrates this aspiration. More than a millenarian promise, it represented an imagined moral community grounded in freedom, justice, and indigenous autonomy. Here Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities becomes particularly illuminating. *Heguangram* was less a geographical destination than a symbolic vision through which dispersed communities imagined themselves as participants in a shared historical project.

Religion, therefore, became inseparable from identity formation. Following Barth (1969), ethnic identity persists not because communities preserve unchanged cultural traditions but because they continually redefine symbolic boundaries distinguishing themselves from others. The Heraka movement established precisely such boundaries. Reformulated rituals, common places of worship, codified teachings, and

shared historical narratives distinguished Heraka followers from Christian Nagas while also resisting incorporation into broader Hindu categories. Religious identity thus became one of the principal mechanisms through which ethnic boundaries were produced and maintained.

Importantly, these boundaries were never static. Longkumer demonstrates that Heraka identity has continually evolved through interaction with Christianity, Hindu organisations, Naga nationalism, and the Indian state. This fluidity challenges essentialist understandings of indigeneity. Indigenous identity is neither biologically inherited nor culturally frozen. Instead, it emerges through ongoing negotiations with changing political contexts. The Heraka movement therefore illustrates that indigeneity itself is a historical process rather than a timeless cultural essence.

Seen from this perspective, religious reform appears less as resistance to modernity than as an indigenous mode of engaging with it. By selectively institutionalising ritual life, reorganising cosmology, codifying religious knowledge, and constructing new forms of collective memory, the Heraka movement transformed indigenous religion into a dynamic resource for negotiating political and cultural change. The movement's enduring significance lies not simply in preserving an indigenous faith but in demonstrating how religion can become a creative instrument for reconstructing identity under conditions of colonialism, competing nationalisms, and continuing social transformation.

Negotiating indigeneity through religious reform: A comparative perspective between the Heraka and Seng Khasi Movements

While the Heraka movement provides an important illustration of how indigenous communities negotiated religious change under colonialism, it was by no means an isolated phenomenon in Northeast India. Across the region, several indigenous societies responded to missionary expansion and colonial governance through organised efforts to revitalise, codify, and institutionalise their religious traditions. Among these, the Seng Khasi movement in present-day Meghalaya offers perhaps the most illuminating comparison. Although the Heraka and Seng Khasi movements emerged within different historical trajectories and among culturally distinct communities, both sought to address a common sociological challenge: how could indigenous societies participate in an increasingly modern political world without surrendering their cultural distinctiveness?

A comparative perspective demonstrates that religious reform in Northeast India cannot be understood merely as an expression of theological revival. Rather, it constitutes a broader social process through which indigenous communities reconstruct collective identities while negotiating multiple centres of political and cultural power. Both movements illustrate that indigeneity is continuously produced through interaction with colonial institutions, Christianity, nationalism, and the modern state rather than existing as a static cultural inheritance.

Colonial encounters and the emergence of indigenous reform

The historical contexts of the Heraka and Seng Khasi movements exhibit striking similarities despite important differences in chronology and political circumstances. The Seng Khasi movement emerged in 1899 under the leadership of Jeebon Roy Mairom in colonial Khasi Hills, primarily as a response to the rapid spread of Christianity and the growing influence of missionary education (Bareh, 1985). Christian missions had established schools, introduced literacy, and increasingly shaped public life within Khasi society. Conversion often became associated with education, government employment, and social mobility, while indigenous religious practices were frequently portrayed as backward or superstitious (Mawrie, 1981).

Similarly, the Heraka movement emerged during the early twentieth century among the Zeme Nagas amid colonial administrative restructuring, economic disruption, and missionary expansion (Longkumer, 2010). British interventions into land administration and village governance weakened traditional institutions while Christian missions introduced alternative systems of religious authority. In

both cases, indigenous religion confronted not simply another faith but an entire institutional order linked to colonial modernity.

Yet neither movement advocated isolation from modern society. Instead, both selectively appropriated aspects of modern organisation to strengthen indigenous traditions. This selective adaptation reflects what Eisenstadt (2000) describes as “multiple modernities” - the idea that societies do not experience a single universal path to modernity but develop distinctive modern institutions rooted in their own historical and cultural contexts. The Heraka and Seng Khasi movements, therefore, represent indigenous modernities rather than survivals of a pre-modern past.

Reforming tradition rather than preserving it

One of the most important similarities between the two movements lies in their understanding of tradition itself. Neither attempted to preserve indigenous religion in an unchanged form. Instead, both actively reinterpreted inherited beliefs to make them socially and politically relevant under changing historical conditions.

The Heraka movement reorganised Zeme cosmology by emphasising Tingwang as the supreme deity, simplifying ritual obligations, discouraging expensive sacrificial practices, and promoting institutional centres such as the *Kelumki* (Longkumer, 2010). These reforms enhanced religious cohesion while making indigenous practice more compatible with changing social conditions.

The Seng Khasi movement similarly undertook significant reforms within Khasi indigenous religion. Although preserving belief in *U Blei Nongthaw* (the Creator) and ancestral traditions, Seng Khasi leaders encouraged greater institutional coordination, organised public religious festivals, promoted indigenous education, and established associations dedicated to preserving Khasi customs and ethical values (Mawrie, 1981). Rather than viewing reform as cultural loss, Seng Khasi intellectuals argued that adaptation was essential for ensuring the continuity of Khasi identity under colonial rule.

These developments challenge romantic understandings of indigenous traditions as timeless cultural relics. As Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argue, traditions frequently undergo conscious reconstruction in response to changing historical circumstances. The legitimacy of tradition lies not in its immutability but in its capacity to maintain continuity while responding creatively to new social realities. Both Heraka and Seng Khasi demonstrate that religious reform often strengthens rather than weakens indigenous identity.

Negotiating the Politics of Indigeneity

Perhaps the most significant contrast between the two movements lies in their differing relationships with regional nationalism and state politics.

The Heraka movement became deeply entangled with competing political projects surrounding Naga nationalism, Zeliangrong identity, and the Indian nation-state. As Longkumer (2010) demonstrates, Heraka followers often occupied politically complex positions. While rejecting British colonial rule, Rani Gaidinliu did not endorse separatist Naga nationalism in the manner advocated by some Christian Naga organisations. Instead, she sought recognition of the distinct political and cultural identity of the Zeliangrong peoples within the Indian Union. Consequently, Heraka identity developed through continuous negotiation with multiple and often competing political formations.

The Seng Khasi movement followed a somewhat different trajectory. Although deeply concerned with preserving Khasi identity, it generally remained less directly involved in armed political movements or competing nationalist projects. Instead, Seng Khasi concentrated on cultural revival, indigenous education, language preservation, and institutional recognition of Khasi religion within democratic constitutional frameworks (Nongbri, 2003). Its politics centred more on cultural rights than territorial nationalism.

This difference illustrates an important sociological point. Religious reform movements cannot be explained solely through theology or culture; they must also be situated within specific political contexts. The forms that indigeneity assumes depend upon the historical relationships between indigenous communities, states, and competing nationalist ideologies.

Indigenous modernity and decolonising religion

The comparison between Heraka and Seng Khasi also contributes to wider debates on decolonising knowledge. Colonial anthropology frequently described indigenous religions as fragmented belief systems lacking coherent theology or institutional organisation. Such descriptions implicitly positioned Christianity and other world religions as more advanced forms of religious life (Asad, 1993).

Both movements challenged these assumptions by demonstrating that indigenous religions possessed the intellectual capacity to reinterpret themselves without abandoning their cultural foundations. Written texts, organised religious associations, educational initiatives, public ceremonies, and institutional leadership did not represent the abandonment of indigenous tradition but its creative rearticulation.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that decolonisation requires indigenous communities to reclaim authority over their own histories and knowledge systems. Religious reform constitutes one important mechanism through which such reclamation occurs. Both the Heraka and Seng Khasi movements sought to redefine indigenous identity on their own terms rather than through colonial classifications of “tribe,” “primitive religion,” or “animism.” Reform, therefore, became an exercise in epistemic self-determination as much as religious transformation.

Discussion

The comparative analysis suggests that indigenous religious reform in Northeast India should be understood neither as simple resistance to Christianity nor as nostalgic attempts to preserve disappearing traditions. Instead, these movements reveal the remarkable capacity of indigenous societies to engage critically with modernity while maintaining cultural autonomy.

The Heraka movement illustrates how religious reform became intertwined with questions of political sovereignty, ethnic mobilisation, and competing nationalisms. The Seng Khasi movement demonstrates a parallel process in which indigenous religion was institutionalised as a foundation for cultural survival and collective dignity. Despite their differences, both movements transformed religion into a vehicle for reconstructing indigeneity under conditions of profound historical change.

Viewed sociologically, these movements challenge linear theories of secularisation and modernisation that assume traditional religions inevitably disappear with social progress. Instead, they support more recent scholarship arguing that modernity frequently generates new forms of religious expression rather than replacing religion altogether (Casanova, 1994). Indigenous communities do not simply resist change; they actively reshape tradition to participate in changing political and social worlds.

The experiences of the Heraka and Seng Khasi therefore demonstrate that indigeneity is best understood as a dynamic historical process continually negotiated through religion, memory, institutions, and political action. Religious reform emerges not as the preservation of a static past but as the creative production of indigenous futures.

Discussion: Towards a Sociology of negotiated indigeneity

The Heraka movement has frequently been examined through the lenses of millenarianism, anti-colonial resistance, or indigenous religious revival. While these interpretations have generated important historical insights, they do not fully explain why the movement has endured across changing political contexts or why it continues to shape debates surrounding identity and belonging among the Zeliangrong peoples. Similarly, the Seng Khasi movement is often interpreted primarily as a cultural preservation

initiative responding to missionary expansion. Although both interpretations capture important dimensions of these movements, they risk reducing religious reform to a defensive response against external forces. The comparative analysis presented in this article suggests a broader sociological interpretation. Religious reform among indigenous communities in Northeast India should be understood as a process through which indigeneity itself is actively negotiated, reconstructed, and reimagined.

The concept of negotiated indigeneity proposed here refers to the continuous reconstruction of indigenous identity through selective engagement with modern institutions, political processes, and competing cultural influences. It challenges two dominant assumptions that continue to shape scholarship on indigenous societies. The first assumes that indigeneity is an inherited cultural essence preserved through resistance to change. The second assumes that modernization inevitably erodes indigenous traditions, leading either to assimilation or secularization. Neither assumption adequately captures the experiences of the Heraka or Seng Khasi communities.

Instead, both movements demonstrate that indigenous societies possess considerable agency in determining the forms through which modernity is experienced. They neither rejected change outright nor accepted it uncritically. Rather, they appropriated, adapted, and reinterpreted elements of colonial administration, institutional religion, literacy, education, and political organisation in ways that strengthened rather than diminished indigenous identities. Religious reform therefore emerged not as a rejection of modernity but as an indigenous strategy for engaging with it on culturally meaningful terms.

This interpretation also contributes to broader debates within the sociology of religion. Classical secularization theories predicted that religion would gradually lose social significance as societies modernized (Berger, 1967). Although these perspectives have been substantially revised, they continue to influence assumptions about the relationship between modernization and religious change. The Heraka and Seng Khasi movements suggest a different trajectory. Rather than disappearing, religion acquired renewed public significance precisely because communities confronted rapid political and social transformation. Religious institutions became sites for negotiating education, cultural preservation, ethnic representation, and political legitimacy. Modernization, therefore, generated new religious forms instead of eliminating religious life.

Similarly, the comparative analysis challenges evolutionary models that classify indigenous religions as “primitive” or incomplete versions of universal religions. Colonial anthropology frequently evaluated indigenous belief systems according to criteria derived from Christianity, emphasising the absence of scriptures, centralised institutions, or formal theology. Such comparisons overlooked the adaptive capacities of indigenous societies. The institutional developments within both the Heraka and Seng Khasi movements - including organised places of worship, written religious texts, educational initiatives, public festivals, and formal religious associations - illustrate that indigenous religions are capable of institutional innovation without abandoning their distinctive epistemological foundations. They should therefore be understood as dynamic knowledge systems rather than static cultural survivals.

The comparison also reveals important differences in the political trajectories of these movements. The Heraka movement evolved within a region characterised by competing claims of Naga nationalism, Zeliangrong identity, and Indian state formation. Consequently, questions of religious reform became closely intertwined with debates surrounding sovereignty, territorial belonging, and political representation. Seng Khasi, by contrast, developed within a political environment where cultural recognition rather than separatist mobilisation remained the principal concern. Its institutional efforts focused on preserving Khasi religion, language, customary law, and public rituals within constitutional democratic structures. These differences remind us that indigenous religious reform cannot be understood independently of the specific political contexts within which communities negotiate their identities.

An equally significant insight emerging from this study concerns the relationship between memory and modernity. Both movements relied upon historical narratives that connected contemporary communities with revered ancestors, sacred landscapes, and foundational religious figures. Yet these memories were not passive recollections of the past. Rather, they functioned as social resources through which communities interpreted present challenges and imagined future possibilities. As Anderson (1983) observed, communities are constituted as much through shared narratives as through shared territories. The Heraka ideal of *heguangram* and the Seng Khasi emphasis on Khasi cultural continuity both illustrate how collective memory provides moral legitimacy for contemporary political and religious projects. Tradition, in this sense, becomes a language through which societies articulate aspirations for the future rather than merely preserving the past.

The comparative perspective further highlights the importance of moving beyond binary understandings of religious change. Indigenous communities are frequently portrayed as existing between mutually exclusive alternatives: tradition or modernity, Christianity or indigenous religion, assimilation or resistance. The experiences of both the Heraka and Seng Khasi movements demonstrate that social realities are considerably more complex. Individuals often participate simultaneously in modern education, democratic politics, constitutional institutions, and indigenous religious practices without perceiving these engagements as contradictory. Such hybridity reflects the everyday negotiation of multiple identities rather than their replacement. Indigeneity, therefore, should be conceptualised as relational, adaptive, and historically situated.

Finally, the arguments developed in this article carry broader implications for the study of indigenous societies beyond Northeast India. Similar processes of religious revitalisation have emerged among numerous indigenous communities across South and Southeast Asia, where religion has become central to struggles over land, political recognition, cultural rights, and historical memory. Comparative research examining movements such as Donyi-Polo in Arunachal Pradesh, Bathou among the Bodos, Sarna among Adivasi communities in central India, or indigenous revitalisation movements elsewhere in the Global South would further illuminate the diverse ways in which religion contributes to the ongoing negotiation of indigeneity. Such comparisons would enrich contemporary sociology by moving beyond Eurocentric assumptions about religion, modernity, and social change.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the Heraka movement should be understood not merely as an indigenous religious revival but as a dynamic sociological process through which indigeneity has been reconstructed under conditions of colonial intervention, Christian expansion, and postcolonial political transformation. Drawing upon Longkumer's ethnography and broader sociological theory, the analysis has shown that religious reform transformed cosmology, ritual life, institutional organisation, and collective memory while simultaneously redefining ethnic identity and political belonging. The comparison with the Seng Khasi movement demonstrates that such processes were not unique to the Zeme Nagas but formed part of a wider pattern of indigenous responses to colonial modernity across Northeast India.

Rather than viewing indigenous religions as static remnants of the past, the article has emphasised their remarkable capacity for institutional innovation and cultural adaptation. Religious reform did not entail abandoning tradition; instead, it involved selectively reinterpreting inherited beliefs to address new historical circumstances. In this sense, tradition functioned not as an obstacle to modernity but as a resource through which indigenous communities engaged with changing political, social, and cultural realities.

The concept of negotiated indigeneity advanced here offers one way of understanding these transformations. It highlights the agency of indigenous communities in shaping their own futures while refusing simplistic oppositions between tradition and change. The Heraka and Seng Khasi movements illustrate that indigeneity is neither an immutable cultural essence nor a disappearing relic of the past. It

is a continually evolving social project constructed through religion, memory, institutions, and political engagement.

Recognising indigenous religious reform in these terms expands sociological understandings of religion beyond questions of belief alone. It foregrounds religion as a medium through which communities negotiate identity, assert cultural autonomy, redraw symbolic boundaries, and imagine collective futures. In an era characterised by increasing debates over indigeneity, citizenship, and cultural rights, the experiences of the Heraka and Seng Khasi movements remind us that religious reform remains one of the most creative and enduring ways through which indigenous societies continue to define themselves on their own terms.

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