



# Christianity in Nagaland

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While the North Americans are “still holding on to at least the language of God and a sense of spirituality,” the Naga people and their culture are imbued with a deep sense of the reality of God.<sup>1</sup> Where American Christianity has experienced a decline in church membership fueled in part by cultural rejection of “labels, doctrines, and organizational forms of Christianity,” the Nagas are deeply spiritual and religious with strong support of organized ecclesiastical institutions.<sup>2</sup> They gather together in their churches long before Sunday worship begins to make sure that they secure a seat in the inner space of the church (many sit outside the church). Almost all the local congregations are expanding and modifying the architecture of the church buildings. Many churches have recreated new spacious buildings with sophisticated technology and modern, trendy interiors. However, despite this quantitative growth in church membership and material prosperity, the Naga Church is not free from cultural and religious challenges.

Naga Christianity exists in a complicated reality of challenging sociopolitical, cultural, and economic conditions. The church struggles to maintain her Christian identity in the midst of one of Asia’s oldest unresolved political conflicts. And yet it

<sup>1</sup>Josh de Keijzer, “Is there Christian faith after religion? The Interview: Diana Butler Bass About the Religious Changes in America,” *Hello Christian* October 19, 2016, <https://hellochristian.com/4838-is-there-christian-faith-after-religion> (accessed September 6, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. Cf. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The end of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013).

*The peoples of the Nagaland region of Northeastern India have overwhelmingly embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ and become Christians. The strong identification of the Naga people with Christianity has a complex history, involving ethnic identity and political and cultural struggles for self-determination.*

is here, at the conjunction of oppression and revival, a mysterious but real connection between faith and vitality among the Naga Christians emerged. Nagaland has known many instances of Christian revival, and this experience is central to the formation of the Naga Christian self-perception. Particularly important were the waves of Christian revival from the 1950s–1970s, which occurred against the backdrop of heightened political and social unrest.<sup>3</sup> These periods in particular are essential to any explanation of Naga Christianity, and in many ways the Naga Church has spent the subsequent years looking to renew the fervor of those awakenings.

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Unpacking this connection between oppression and vital faith requires an understanding of key events in Naga history and their impact on a Christian identity woven in the tapestry of unfolding political history. To move us in this direction, I will present a brief introduction to Naga history, followed by a consideration of the Christian tradition, which emerged in that context and which has now become a mark of national identity. I will tease out intersectional points between the Naga quest for self-rule and the development of indigenous Christianity. To consider this juncture more carefully, I will focus on the period of the 1950s, which saw both terrible political upheaval and great religious revival.

#### WHO ARE THE NAGAS?

The Nagas are a transnational indigenous people. The people of the Naga Hills (now known as Nagaland) were comprised of many separate and independent tribal groups. Despite the fact that each Naga village existed as an autonomous village-state, these numerous tribes were lumped together under the name Naga. “Naga” is a term imposed by outsiders, in this case the British. General consensus is that the name originated with their immediate neighbors the Assamese, who used it to refer to certain isolated mountain tribes. When the British attributed the term to all tribal peoples in the region, this emerged as a collective Naga identity. Though they inhabit the geographic area of the Northeast India, they do not see themselves as Indian.

For the Nagas, Indian identity is a political reality imposed by force and not by choice. Historically, Nagaland was never a part of India. Neither did the Nagas share any cultural affinity with the Indians. Culturally and religiously, the Nagas

<sup>3</sup>Although the Naga revival movement in the 1970s was even more widespread, and not without the absence of political turmoil, than the 1950s, I shall focus on the 1950s for the sake of dealing with the arguments centered against it for our purposes.

belong to the Mongolian race with their own traditional religion, whereas the Indians belong to the Aryan and Dravidian races and are predominantly Hindu and Muslim. This is underscored by the Nagas' rejection of the Hindu *Varna* (caste) system. Today, the Nagas consist of about forty ethnic groups, numbering approximately three million people.<sup>4</sup> This population is divided by the political boundaries of India and Myanmar.<sup>5</sup>

The complicated political history of the Nagas, the mountainous regions where they live, even a past reputation as headhunters, have conspired to obscure the subtleties of Naga religious and cultural expression from outsiders. Unfortunately, even well-intentioned and otherwise sturdy scholarship can be hobbled by such challenges. For example, historian Robert Eric Frykenberg deals substantially with Naga Christianity, something often neglected in the written histories of Christianity in India. However, his erroneous description of Nagas as “*adivasis*” is a case in point.<sup>6</sup> The term “*adivasi*” refers to tribals in the rest of India, with North-east India as an exception. It refers to a specific community of tribes and sub-tribes such as the Santhals or the Munda who were recruited from the central regions of India to work in the tea gardens of Assam during colonial times.<sup>7</sup> The Nagas are not “*adivasis*.” This seems minor to the outside reader, but the Naga heart rises up against this, which is not surprising given the sociopolitical context in which they have been forged.

#### CHRISTIANITY IN NAGALAND

British-Naga relations began around 1832, but it was American Baptist missionaries who introduced Christianity to the Nagas. When the first American missionary, Edward Winter Clark (1830–1913), undertook mission activities at the invitation of a group of Nagas, he did so under the restrictions of the British Raj and against the best judgement of the American Baptist Missionary Home Board.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Clark believed he had found his life work in the Naga Hills. His inaugural visit to the hills of the Ao-Naga people happened in 1872. There he organized the first Naga Baptist Church around fifteen recently baptized natives. Clark and his wife Mary Mead Clark (1832–1924) took up proper residence in March 1876. Today, of

<sup>4</sup>It is difficult to ascertain the Naga population due to political fragmentation of the Naga homeland. Moreover, the restrictive situation in Myanmar prevents anyone from knowing the approximate numbers of the Nagas within Myanmar, therefore the total population of the Nagas is just an estimation. However, according to the statistics shown by the 2011 census of the Nagaland state government, the Naga population within the state is 1.988 million.

<sup>5</sup>See Vibha Joshi, “The Naga: An Introduction,” in *Naga: A Forgotten Mountain Region Rediscovered*, eds. Richard Kunz and Vibha Joshi (Basel: Christoph Meriam Verlag and Museum der Kulturen Basel, 2008) 37–38.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Erik Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup>Sriram Ananthanarayanan, “Scheduled Tribe Status for Adivasis in Assam,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 33/2 (August 2010) 290.

<sup>8</sup>This is an intriguing fact to consider amid the prevailing assumption of forced evangelization in the postcolonial context.

nearly two million Naga within Nagaland, about ninety percent are Christians, making it the most populated Baptist Church on earth by percentage.<sup>9</sup>

Until 1950, Naga Christians were exclusively Baptist, and it still accounts for seventy-five percent of Christians there. Among the remainder of denominations, the Nagaland Christian Revival Church weighs in at around eleven percent. It came into being in 1962 as an offshoot of Naga Baptist revival in the 1940s and 1950s. It was not until April of 1951 that the first Roman Catholic Church was established among the Lotha-Naga tribe, and Catholics now number around three percent of Naga Christians. The remainder are comprised of the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission, Assemblies of God Church, and other charismatic Pentecostal and interdenominational churches. Filling out the roster are groups like the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the Jacobite Orthodox Church, and others essentially ministering to nonindigenous people in the state.

#### CONJUNCTION OF OPPRESSION AND REVIVAL: ON A QUEST TOWARDS DISCERNING THE NAGA CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Nagaland is known for its tumultuous history of violence and political oppression. An overview of the Naga political past will reveal a history of successive colonization, first under British colonial power and presently under the colonial mimicry of India. Historically and politically, the Nagas are a doubly-colonized people whose history is one of bloody struggle, suffering, and violent suppression of their struggle for identity and self-determination. Their sociopolitical situation is an outcome of the British colonial “divide and rule” policy.<sup>10</sup> The Anglo-Naga relationship began with mutual dislike and contempt, eventually giving way to amicable trust. However, in their exit the British Raj made no separate political provision for the Naga people. This left them at the mercy of the Indian government, which assumed the mantle of colonial master. Indian military occupation of the Naga Hills began in 1955 in order to suppress Naga self-determination.

However, it is within the cracks of the Indo-Naga relationship that the intricate conjunction of oppression and revival transpires. Naga Christianity has been shaped by the necessities of their political situation, and Christianity has become deeply tied to national identity. According to Kiran Shankar Maitra, “Politics in Nagaland is like an iceberg; very little is visible on the surface, but what is visible is the expansion of the invisible.”<sup>11</sup> When the Naga tribes sought self-government—something which had been promised them in earlier negotiations—India deployed its military. Lawlessness and violence flared when India initiated military operations to subdue the Naga people. The Naga army, already established in 1954,

<sup>9</sup>David Bebbington, *Baptist through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010) 250.

<sup>10</sup>The “divide and rule” policy refers to the territorial separation through isolation and partition; this is a widely-pursued policy in British colonies with long-lasting geographical and political consequences.

<sup>11</sup>Kiran Shankar Maitra, *The Naga Rebels and Insurgency in the North East* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1998) 3.

then took up arms to defend the country. This led to full-scale Indo-Naga armed conflict beginning on March 25, 1955.

The Nagas were now fighting a guerrilla war against forced incorporation into India, the country with whom they shared a border. In the ensuing occupation, Nagaland was decimated and her people subdued by terrible, sometimes unspeakable, means. Approximately two-thirds of Naga villages were intentionally burned, rice crops destroyed, and property looted. Worse, the atrocities committed against the Nagas were horrific, so much so that words like torture, murder, and rape do not do justice to the reality.<sup>12</sup> Daily life for the Naga came to a standstill; worship services were cancelled as Indian security forces occupied the Church buildings.<sup>13</sup> Many Naga men, women, and children headed to the surrounding jungle where they lived in harsh conditions and fought a guerrilla war against India's military occupation.

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Eventually, the government of India introduced concentration camps for the Nagas, drawing them in with a promise that they could gain “amnesty” and be allowed to rebuild the villages in their ancestral homes. The result was that “[t]he residents of several villages were brought to one central village, which was fenced round and kept under protection of strong security forces.”<sup>14</sup> Camps were difficult places, to say the least, and this was compounded by another act of domination; to their utter dismay, many Nagas in the camps received news that they could not return to their ancestral lands but were to be forcibly relocated in what Naga historian Kaka D. Iralu calls the “mass exodus.”<sup>15</sup>

The psychological trauma of long-term military conflict and occupation has had a real and lasting impact on the Naga psyche. The presence of Indian soldiers and their continued abuses is a present reality. I recall that even as a schoolgirl in the 1980s, I had to pass through an Indian Army outpost daily. My friends and I would travel to and from school in fear, filled with apprehension, afraid that the soldiers would see us without adult company and do something terrible. The horrendous acts meted out to the Nagas by the Indian military resulted in myriad

<sup>12</sup>For further details with dates of incidents see Kaka D. Iralu, *Nagaland and India: The Blood and the Tears: A Historical Account of the Fifty-two Year Indo-Naga War and the Story of Those Who Were Never Allowed to Tell It* (Kohima: Kaka D. Iralu, 2003).

<sup>13</sup>Charles Pawsey, “The Naga Problem: Confidential Paper” (Unpublished document), 1965, 6; V. K. Nuh, *Nagaland Church and Politics* (Kohima: V. K. Nuh & Bros, 2002) 149–150.

<sup>14</sup>B. N. Mullik, *My Years with Nehru, 1948–1964* (Allied Pub., 1972) 313.

<sup>15</sup>Iralu, *Nagaland and India*, 149.

forms of devastation. At the same time, the period between 1953–1956 was a phenomenal one for Naga Christianity. In their despair and privation, people turned their allegiance to the living God alone. V. K. Nuh, a product of this period, reports that people who fled to the jungles for safety “experienced unusual working of the Holy Spirit in the jungle camps.” Their faith experiences were so real and compelling that upon returning from jungles, they erected places of worship even before they rebuilt their houses.<sup>16</sup>

This and similar stories of 1950s revival phenomena are filled with the remarkable and the miraculous. This revival is more than mere emotional release or act of sociopolitical cohesion, and the accounts indicate a truly remarkable experience of God’s power. Nuh records a strong mass-spiritual awakening that touched almost all the tribes. The resulting growth in church membership was so rapid that thatched-roofed church buildings were often hurriedly constructed in order to accommodate the overcrowded churches.<sup>17</sup> The experience of divine power in religious revival, combined with Baptist-influenced theology, continues to shape Naga Christianity. Christians there continue to pass on stories of the miracles and other demonstrations of divine power that occurred, and long for another of God’s compelling calls.

Of course, with the complexities of Naga history there are many avenues for interpreting what the revival represents. For example, Naga scholar Tezenlo Thong believes the narrative of awakening and the Naga people’s choice of Christianity was “to a degree, a form of political resistance.”<sup>18</sup> He holds that Naga conversions represented an unhealthy identification with “their erstwhile Christian Western colonizers.” This, he says, “was in part an opposition to their immediate non-Christian colonizer, that is, India.”<sup>19</sup> This, he concludes was “more likely to be a symptom of a communal nervous breakdown” rather “than a divine intervention.”<sup>20</sup>

Thong is attempting to provide a counter-narrative to the “meta-narrative of the Nagas largely constructed by non-Nagas.”<sup>21</sup> His view is not entirely wide of the mark. The occurrence of religious revival or awakening of the collective consciousness in the form of people’s movements is not a new phenomenon in crisis-torn sociopolitical contexts.<sup>22</sup> Bendangjungshi, also a Naga scholar, remarks that “re-

<sup>16</sup>Nuh, *Nagaland Church and Politics*, 65.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.* For instance, in the Chakhesang area, a church membership of 700 in 1953 increased to 4,407 by 1960; the Angami area had 1000 baptisms in 1958 alone, and among the Lothas, 733 new members were baptized in 1951 alone. Longkumer, *A Study of Revival in Nagaland* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1981) 25.

<sup>18</sup>Tezenlo Thong, “‘Thy Kingdom Come’: The Impact of Colonization and Proselytization on Religion among the Nagas,” in *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45/6 (2010) 599.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 603.

<sup>21</sup>Tezenlo Thong, *Progress and Its Impact on the Nagas: A Clash of Worldviews* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014) xiii.

<sup>22</sup>For instance, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), an Indian jurist, economist, politician, and social

vival movements arise as social movements coupled with Christian religious fervor” for liberation from mental, psychological and physical traumas.<sup>23</sup> The question for us here is whether Naga conversions were primarily or solely influenced by political context, or was it a response to a spiritual yearning the people had deep within, something awakened by the desire for peace and security amidst chaos?

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Nuh’s account indicates the presence of what Bebbington would call a spiritually-fueled environment. Additionally, we know that potent cultural beliefs are ever present in the human mind. Nagas have historically had a strong belief in life after death, which is highly compatible with the Christian message of hope, heaven, and salvation, but which remains culturally and religiously significant even apart from Christian belief. It is in itself a bedrock component of the Naga worldview, but it is only one part. It can equally be considered a clear expression of the people’s personal response to the divine Spirit working within the midst of unfolding human drama. The ability of several explanatory paradigms to account for the same information attests to the functional viability of each of the schemas.

In our case, each may in some way give a truthful representation of the sociopolitical and religious pressures present in the revival events. There is surely more than one way to explain such complex points in human history. That said, when more than one explanatory narrative is presented it is necessary to give priority to a particular explanation. I believe that first priority must be given to the account itself, as it expresses the perceptions of those who actually experienced the event, in this case a religious revival. Outside observers may feel that their strategy for explanation is superior, but the scholarly mind must never place itself in the position of oligarchy.

While meta-narratives may be attractive, an account of events must take seriously the experience of the persons within the event. It is often the case that when the people’s basic needs were completely stripped from their reach that they were led to the point of arriving at their true self—a moment in time when a power higher than themselves was undeniably felt and experienced. Meta-analysis derived from such historical events acts as a possible pointer to the larger perspec-

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reformer converted to Buddhism, initiating mass conversions of Dalits and awakening of their conscience. This resulted in their taking a political stance in response to the oppression they were experiencing under the Indian caste system—a religious sanction in Indian culture that is detrimental to human equality in society.

<sup>23</sup>Bendangjungshi, *Confessing Christ in the Naga Context: Towards a Liberating Ecclesiology* (Münster: LIT Verlag Fresnoster, 2011) 90.

tives, yet without overshadowing the immediate perceptions of what was empirically experienced.

## CONCLUSION

Naga Christianity exists in a difficult political reality, which challenges Christian identity. At the conjunction of oppression and faith the Naga Church has found a vitality and commonality reminiscent of the United States in the post-World War II period. Influenced by American Baptist evangelism and scarred by the brutality of war and oppression, Naga Christians have found a sense of identity and cohesion in religion denied them in political life. As a result, Christianity has become coterminous with Naga political identity. This has led some to question the motivation behind mass Christian conversions in a time of war with India, the vast majority of whom are Hindu and Muslim. However, conversion to Christian faith is a complex and individual choice. While social, political, and economic issues obviously come into play in any such decision, we must listen carefully to the voices of those who have told their stories and give them a role in interpreting what they mean. For many Naga Christians, the political and the religious keep close company. Yes, we do have a popular belief of nonengagement in the sociopolitical realm among Naga Christians. This challenges the church to keep vigilant and clearheaded, pursuing life in Christ Jesus before all else. ☩

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