Roots of Faith: How Tangkhul Naga Beliefs Shaped the Reception of Christianity

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Abstract

This study delves into the traditional religion of the Tangkhuls and assesses the success of Christian missions in their community. The extraordinary growth prompts one to seek reasons and specifically to ask whether the Tangkhul conception of God may be an important factor in the acceptance of Christianity by the Tangkhuls. The study shows that the Tangkhul traditional religion was never contradictory to Christianity; rather, the traditional religion served as the fertile ground for the message of Christianity among the Tangkhuls. Despite the imperialistic nature of the missionaries and the Tangkhuls' conversion to Christianity, the structure of Tangkhul traditional culture remained largely unchanged. The article also explores how the Tangkhul villages' inherently self-governing and autonomous character creates a conducive environment for spreading the Baptist belief in the local church's autonomy. Many traditional beliefs have been merged with the new belief system and incorporated into the church.

Keywords: Christianity, Belief System, Traditional Belief System, Missionaries, Conversion

6.0 Introduction

The Tangkhuls are one of the major (in terms of population) Naga tribes, inhabiting the adjoining frontier areas of North-East India and North-West Myanmar. Linguistically, the Tangkhuls have been classified under the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family by G.A Grierson (1903). The Tangkhuls in India are concentrated in the Ukhrul and Kamjong districts[1] of Manipur; they are also found in the contiguous areas of Senapati, Thoubal and

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Kangpokpi districts. There are 226 Tangkhul villages in Manipur as of 1996 (Peter 2004). On the Burma side, the Tangkhuls are located mainly in the Somra Tract. As per the Tangkhul Naga Baptist Association (TNBA) statistics of 1998-1999, there are 22 Tangkhul villages in Leshi Township and five Tangkhul villages in Homalin Township in Burma. The population of the Tangkhul tribes in India, as per the 2011 Census reports, is 178,568, though the accurate population of the Tangkhuls in the Burma side is not exactly known. This article focuses exclusively on the Tangkhuls of India. Today, over 98.11% of the Tangkhul population are identified as Christian, belonging to various denominations. Among them, the Baptist Church is the dominant group, comprising more than 90%[2] of the Christian population.

Tangkhul traditional religion can be understood as a term to describe the religious beliefs and practices of the Tangkhul Naga before their encounter with the Christian beliefs in the last decade of the 19th century. Christianity in Tangkhul community can be described as the faith and practices introduced by American Baptist missionaries during the last decade of the 19th century[3]. This form of Christianity has since become a defining feature of the Christian church among the Tangkhuls. Notably, there is now a considerable presence of various denominational churches within the Tangkhul community. The term "God" is used here to refer both to the Supreme Deity in Tangkhul spirituality and to the Almighty God in Christianity. In contrast, "gods" denotes a multitude of lesser spiritual entities that hold specific roles, positions, and functions within the Tangkhul spiritual cosmology.

The arrival of Christianity among the Tangkhul people was unintended. William Pettigrew, the first American Baptist missionary in Manipur, initially aimed to Christianise the Meitei in the valley of Manipur. The political agent of Manipur Alexander Porteous asked the missionary to discontinue his work for fear that the antagonised Vaishnavite Meiteis might arise in rebellion. By this time, Hinduism among the Meitei had been well-established (Down 1971: 57). Pettigrew was given an option either to leave Manipur or work among the hill tribes who were not Hindu and following the traditional religion. The missionary chose the latter and started his work among the Tangkhul Naga tribes in 1896B (The Baptist Missionary Magazine 1904*)*. Christianity was swiftly and without much resistance embraced by the Tangkhuls.

The high watermark of Christian conversion in the Tangkhul community was reached in the period between 1921 and 1931. Within a decade, the number of Christians rose steeply. In the 1920s the Christian population of Tangkhul community was 300 (Down 1971:165). By 1927, there were 2,000 Tangkhul Christians (Down 1971:164). In 1926, the Tangkhul New Testament was published- the first in the Manipuri language (ibid.). By 1950, the Tangkhul church, with more than 10,000 members, was the largest and strongest church in Manipur (Down 1971: 166) in a population of less than fifty thousand. The figure suggests that more than 20% of the Tangkhuls were Christian by 1950.

Today, the Tangkhul community is one of the strongest churches in the northeast of India, with a hundred per cent Christian believers. The growth of Christianity among the Tangkhuls is recorded at a faster rate than in any other community. The remarkable growth of Christianity among the Tangkhuls prompts an inquiry into the reasons behind it, particularly whether the Tangkhul traditional conception of God played a significant role in their acceptance of the Christian faith. In light of this, one is prompted to ask why the Tangkhul accepted the Christian faith with little resistance. Was it due to similarities in their belief systems, or did the shared conception of God facilitate the Tangkhuls' easy acceptance of a foreign religion?

6.1 Tangkhul Traditional belief system and worldview

The Tangkhuls conceived of two realms: the visible world, representing their present life, which they can see and experience, and an invisible world called *keizeiram*, translated as the land of death. It is believed that all deceased persons gather and live in *Keizeiram*, a replica of the present world, where the poor will remain poor and the rich will remain rich. Hudson T.C, referring to belief in life after death among the Tangkhuls, writes, 'on that side of the river they are believed to commence and carry on an existence similar to that enjoyed or otherwise, when alive on earth. The wealthy enjoy their wealth again, and the poor eke out the precarious existence suffered on earth' (Hudson 1911:157).

The Tangkhul belief system is deeply embedded in their culture, with rituals and worship passed down orally. It lacks formal tenets, doctrines, sects, or denominations and is not centred on any historical figure or founder. The Tangkhul religion is fundamentally communal in nature and part and parcel of their lives.

Their belief system features a well-developed set of rituals officiated by the village priest and clan diviners. Stephen Angkang, who is the authority on the customary laws of the Tangkhuls, wrote that to officiate the rituals and religious activities, every village has a *sharwo* (chief priest), *sharva* (priests), and *sharngawor* (priests to assist the *sharwo*) (Hurton 1975). It has no missionaries to spread its teachings, nor does it involve individuals preaching to others. Instead, it is a community-based religion where every member is a custodian of the belief system.

The Tangkhuls believe in the existence of a Supreme God, who is known by various names such as *Ameowo*[4]*, Reisangchonme, Zinghungo, Leihungo,* etc, who is believed to be the creator of all things. The Tangkhuls also believe in spiritism; there are multitudes of spirits collectively called *kameo*. The *kameo* influences the lives of men. The pre-Christian faith of the Tangkhuls was characterised by a rich proliferation of ideas about the *kameo* and their behaviours. Most events, fortunate or unfortunate, are attributed to their agency. There existed numerous techniques for approaching them. Conceptions of the Supreme Being, however, were comparatively vague and insubstantial. Only a few events were directly associated with him, and methods of approaching the Supreme Being remained largely undeveloped.

Robin Horton (1975), a social anthropologist, formulated an explanation of African cosmology and observed that the basic idea of African cosmology is divided into two structures: first-tier occupied by the numerous gods termed by Horton as lesser spirits, and the second, the Supreme Being. The lesser spirits operate and function in the microcosm of the local community and environment, while the Supreme Being operates within the larger cosmic order that Robin Horton described as the macrocosm. Since the microcosm forms part of the macrocosm, the lesser spirits are considered as the manifestations of the supreme being or derive their power from him (Hurton:1975:220). Horton's intellectual theory, described by Philip Curtin as 'the classic treatment of African conversion', (Curtin 2000:125) provides a framework that also explains the cosmology of the Tangkhuls.

The cosmology of the Tangkhul people is structured into two distinct layers: the first layer comprises lesser spirits, while the second layer is centred around the Supreme Being. The lesser spirits control the events and processes in the microcosm of the local community and its

environment, while the Supreme Being oversees the events and processes operating in the macrocosm and remains concerned with the universe in its entirety.

The cosmology of traditional Tangkhul is filled with a sense of the host of spirit-beings, some good, and some evil, which influence the course of a Tangkhul's life. In traditional Tangkhul society, appeasing evil and unpredictable spirits was practically the basic substance of religion (Das 2024:59). Individuals made sacrifices to spirits not as acts of spiritual edification, but as measures to appease their wrath and avert potential harm. Moral restraint was thus motivated less by an ethical sense of right and wrong than by the fear that transgressions might offend a spirit and invite misfortune. As observed by Philip Ngakang, an elder from Ringui village, the notions of "right" and "wrong" are understood as a new concept in the Tangkhul society after conversion. There was no right and wrong in the modern sense of the term in pre-Christian Tangkhul society. Anything that had the approval of society was termed as right, and whatever was disapproved by society was wrong[5].

Disasters wait around every corner and threaten even the most capable and intelligent. A wise man seeks the help of the spirits, which, though unseen, are clearly at work in all activities. Thus, the crucial question is how to win over these spirit beings for the benefit of one's life. To placate the wrath of the spirit, people have to proceed by submission, communion, and appeal to the supernatural. The Tangkhuls believe that as mortals, they are too feeble to stand against the spirits. So instead of antagonising them, they did their best to pacify them (Rimai 2014:6).

The Tangkhuls worship a multitude of spirits known by a collective name - *kameo*. They had different spirits for different social needs, such as a spirit for home, for paddy fields, for shifting cultivation (jhum) fields, etc. The gods are classified as household gods (*shim kameo*), jungle spirits (*ngahong kameo*) and field spirits (*lui kameo*), etc. The Tangkhul's two most popular spirits are *phungui philava,* the goddess of crops and *kokto,* the god of *Kazeiram* 'the land of death. Unlike the masculine understanding of god in Christianity, the Tangkhuls have an equal number of goddesses as the gods. They believe that power does not reside alone in the Supreme God nor only in the lesser spirits, but is distributed among them. They are capable of making a man happy and dejected. Therefore, they seek the help of them all; the Nagas are aware of their dependence upon unseen powers (Kharay 2001:15).

The essence of the pre-Christian Tangkhul society is that most events affecting the individual's life occur within the local community's microcosm. Since most significant social interaction occurs within the local community, moral rules tend to apply within the community rather than universally. Given the proposition that lesser spirits are credited with direct responsibility for most events of human concern, they were the primary guardians of morality and the objects of constant approach by human beings, whereas the Supreme Being was credited with direct responsibility for relatively few events of human concern and has no direct association with morality and is seldom approached by human beings.

The Tangkhuls believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, whom they call by a different name: *Ameowo, Kasa akhava, Zinghunga, Leihunga, Reisangchonme, Varivara,* etc. Perhaps one of the most probable reasons for having multiple names for the Supreme Being could be because of the linguistic variation among the Tangkhul villages. The Tangkhuls traditionally lived in autonomous village communities, each functioning as an independent socio-political and ritual unit. Because of this autonomy, each village evolved its own dialect and, by

extension, its own name for the Supreme Being. Traditional Tangkhuls do not have a centralised worship system devoted to the Supreme Being. Religious practice is transmitted orally. In oral traditions, names tend to shift fluidly, sometimes referring to a divine quality e.g *Kasa akhava* (the creator), *Reisangchonme* (the helper), *Varivara* (who existed since the beginning), etc, rather than a fixed personal name. One of the informants from the Ukhrul (Tangkhul) says that the Tangkhul Christian name for God *Varivara* is derived from *Uri-Ura* (meaning-'since beginning'). Thus, the Supreme Being worshipped by the traditional Tangkhul Nagas was eternal; he was there from the beginning. The gender of *Uri-Ura* is not known. The term *Varivara*, which the Christianised Tangkhuls use to address God, was perhaps popularised by William Pettigrew. It is derived from the Tangkhul words *Uri-Ura*, meaning 'since the beginning,' signifying that God has existed since eternity. Rev. Pettigrew, who worked among the Tangkhul as a Christian missionary, wrote,

> 'The Tangkhul Nagas,….believe in a supreme being, known by them as *Varivara*, who made the world but is not much interested in its inhabitants. Far more important to the average man are the numerous *kumyas* (kameos), 'demons' who are supposed to inhabit every hill and stream'[6] (Solo &. Mahangthei nd.: 39).

The Supreme Being is believed to be the creator of the universe, the prime mover, and all the lesser spirits, and men are created by Him. One of the most common names of God in Tangkhul is *Kasa Akhava,* meaning 'the creator owner'; it denotes that He is the creator and maker of the earth and the universe.

The Tangkhuls believe that the universe and everything in it was created by *Ameowo*. Yet the Supreme Being is a remote figure with whom they have no direct dealings. The Supreme God was not an intimate, personal deity but a distant force-a *deus otiosus*. Interestingly, no offerings were made to *Ameowo*. He is not envious of people's devotion to other deities and does not mind sacrifices being offered to other spirits. One cannot see the places or spaces where the Supreme Being is worshipped. The greatest of the deities is also the least honoured. For all practical purposes, the Tangkhuls relegated the Supreme Being to a comparatively insignificant position.

But this doesn't imply that the Supreme Being and the Tangkhul Naga have no interest in each other on many crucial occasions or events; the Tangkhuls take the name of the Supreme Being. It is a common practice for a Tangkhul to say, *Kasa Akhavana katheina*, meaning, "God (or *Ameowo*) knows". When events do not unfold as expected and their causes remain inexplicable, people often attribute them to divine will, saying, "God knows". When a dispute or misunderstanding arises, people used to take the name of God by saying, "may *Ameowo* judge us".

6.2 Tangkhul Belief Systems and the Spread of Christianity

The remarkable expansion of Christianity among the Tangkhul Nagas invites an inquiry into the factors underlying its rapid success. This transformation necessitates an examination of the indigenous religious practices, cultural traditions, and value systems within the Tangkhul worldview that facilitated its acceptance.

The similarity between Christianity and the Tangkhul belief system facilitated the establishment of Christianity among the Tangkhuls. When the new teachings were introduced, the Tangkhuls found it easy to accept them, as they were not very different from their existing beliefs.

The spread of Christianity among the Tangkhuls must be understood in relation to their traditional belief system. The core values, the philosophical concepts and spiritual outlook of the Tangkhul tradition created a fertile ground for the growth of Christianity. In many ways, the success of Christianisation was made possible by the very nature of the Tangkhul religious worldview.

The Tangkhul traditional religion shares several similarities with monotheistic faiths like Christianity. For instance, they believe in the Supreme God who is the creator of all things, and there is no image of God. He is the protector and sustainer of life, a champion of justice[7], and one who accepts sacrifices. Belief in life after death and the existence of a spiritual realm was already present among the Tangkhuls before the arrival of Christian missionaries. The practice of burying the dead was also an established tradition before the introduction of Christian death rituals. The concept of a God who is omnipresent, eternal, and transcends time was not foreign to the Tangkhul worldview. Furthermore, the idea of a sacrificial figure, central to Christian theology in the person of Jesus, finds a parallel in the Tangkhul belief system. Ideas such as scapegoats, sacrifices, offerings, the spiritual and material worlds, life after death, visions, dreams, and revelations already existed in the traditional Tangkhul belief system. The Christian concept of heaven finds a close parallel with the Tangkhul notion of *Kazeiram*, the land of the dead. Likewise, the Christian God, the creator of heaven and earth, closely corresponds to the Tangkhul deity believed to have created all things above and below the earth by *Kasa Akhava*. Moreover, many of the moral and ethical principles emphasised by Christianity were already embedded in Tangkhul customary life.

This dynamic corresponds with Robin Horton's argument (Horton 1975:220), developed in the context of African cosmology, that a society's pre-existing patterns of thought and value systems determine its receptivity to external cultural or religious influences. Similarly, the Tangkhul Nagas interpreted the concepts of Christian cosmology through the framework of their own indigenous cosmological understanding. It is this internal system of thought and belief rather than external pressures that ultimately shapes how Christianity are perceived and assimilated.

Among the many parallels between Tangkhul traditional beliefs and Christianity, the concept of the scapegoat stands out prominently. The Christian doctrine of sacrificial atonement through Christ closely resembles the Tangkhul practice of using a scapegoat to avert sickness or death, wherein an animal or fowl is offered in substitution for the afflicted individual.

The absence of image worship among the Tangkhuls closely parallels the Christian injunction, 'Thou shalt not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath'[8]. This reflects a pre-existing belief that God is formless and should be worshipped in spirit.

The continued sustenance of Christianity among the Tangkhuls, without instances of reverting to traditional beliefs, can be understood as aligning with the Tangkhuls' traditional ethos of economic self-sufficiency and an inherently independent spirit.

We shall examine two key foundations shared by Christianity and Tangkhul traditional beliefs, which together enabled the growth of Christianity upon the existing cultural and religious framework. We shall also explore how the traditional Tangkhul system of village self-governance played a vital role in sustaining the life and functioning of the local church.

6.3 The Concept of the Scapegoat

René Girard, a French cultural anthropologist and literary critic, in his study of the scapegoat mechanism, observed that when a community faces a widespread crisis or existential threat, it often responds by identifying an innocent individual or group as a scapegoat to blame for the problem (Girard 1986). Scapegoating is the act of blaming someone or something for something bad that someone else has done, which Rene Girard considered the foundation of cultural life and is believed to go back in the evolution of *Homo sapiens.* The concept of the scapegoat is present in both the traditional beliefs of the Tangkhul and in Christianity.

The practice of using a scapegoat was common among many Naga tribes, and the Tangkhuls were no exception. Hudson writes, 'At Mao and in some Quoireng (Koireng) villages, the Khullakpa (village chiefs) let a cock go free outside the village, presumably as a sort of scapegoat. At Jessami (Tangkhul) village, they have annually a prophylactic genna lasting for eight days in order to avert sickness. A bird is killed in the jungle, and if it happens to be a large one, there will be no sickness' (Hudson 1911:137).

In Jewish tradition, a sinless goat was sacrificed to carry the sins of the people, allowing them to escape punishment. In this context, a "scapegoat" (derived from "escape" + "goat") refers to the animal that bears the sins of others, making atonement on their behalf. In Tangkhul the concept of the scapegoat is referred to as *makhon kahai yao* (*makhon*-escape, *yao*-sheep). In the same manner as the Jewish tradition of sacrificing the goat, in Tangkhul, a rooster is set free as a scapegoat.

The rooster is held responsible for the wrongdoings of someone, allowing the true culprit to go unpunished. According to traditional belief, if a person becomes ill, it is thought that the spirit is displeased with them. To remedy this, a rooster is set free in the wilderness, symbolising the transfer of the person's sickness or impending death to the bird, thereby releasing the person from their affliction. The *sharwo* will release the rooster in the wilderness by saying, " *noh, harva kapei hi na khuilo, laga mipa hiwui (kakaza pawui aming) mangla chihowunglo*" meaning, "Here, take this mature rooster and release the spirit of (name of the sick person) instead." The releasing of the rooster in the wilderness functions as a scapegoat and not as an object of exchange. The bird is not offered as a trade with the spirit, but it was symbolically loaded with the guilt, illness or misfortune of the person. By releasing the rooster into the wilderness, the burden is transferred away from the human sufferer, allowing the afflicted person to go free. The offer made by *Sharwo* to take the mature rooster and release the spirit of the sick person instead reinforces the act of substitution; the rooster is made to carry away the wrongs or sickness. This parallels scapegoat rituals in many cultures, where an animal is symbolically made to bear the community's sins or misfortunes and is then driven out or sacrificed (Ayali-Darshan 2020).

Stephen Angakang (2018: 57) notes that when a person's sickness was believed to be caused by a spirit, the *sharwo* would take two mature roosters. One was sacrificed at the

threshing floor—an annexe to the house used for pounding grain, grinding, and feeding domestic animals—while the other was released into the wilderness as a scapegoat to release the spirit afflicting the person.

The Christian missionaries tapped into this indigenous belief to convey that all people have sinned against God and are destined for death, but that only Jesus can offer salvation and eternal life. As a result, the Tangkhuls embraced the gospel to be saved. When the crucifixion of Jesus was explained to the Tangkhuls during their encounter with Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth century as an atonement for human sins, they found it easy to grasp the complex idea of scapegoating. This was because the concept of a scapegoat was already a part of their traditional belief system.

6.4 There is no Image of God in Tangkhul

In Tangkhul belief, God is not represented through a physical image but is conceptualised and understood as the creator and sustainer of life. Tangkhul did not ask the missionary what the Christian God looked like when they first met. The Tangkhuls believed that spirits are omnipresent and capable of transforming into any form. God holds a central place in their worldview. For them, God is an abstract entity, perceived as all-encompassing and continuously involved in human affairs. As a result, there is no physical representation of God in the traditional religion of the Tangkhul.

When the missionaries taught the Tangkhuls that in Christianity, God is understood as transcendent and formless, with no physical image or representation. The Tangkhuls accepted this without hesitation. They understood that Christian belief holds God as a spirit, beyond any visual form or full comprehension.

6.5 Self-sufficient, Independent Village and a Self-supporting, Autonomous Church

The success and enduring presence of the Christian Baptist denomination among the Tangkhul people raises important questions: What elements of Baptist doctrine were so compatible with Tangkhul traditional practices and customs that they led to widespread acceptance, and why have there been practically no cases of a return to traditional religious practices, which are very common among tribal converts in many parts of India and other parts of the world?

Among other reasons, the traditionally autonomous administration of Tangkhul villages—independent from other villages or tribes—and the Baptist emphasis on local autonomy may have been contributing factors. The three core principles of the organising way of the Baptist—self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating—align with the Tangkhul tradition of economic self-sufficiency and independence. Politically and administratively, the Tangkhul villages operate as independent republic units. The shared principle of independence in both the Tangkhul traditional system and Baptist practice may have been a key reason why the Tangkhul people found Christianity acceptable when it was introduced to them in the late 19th century.

Tangkhul traditional religion is an integral part of the structure of Tangkhul society that shapes the belief system, customs, traditions, and culture of its people. The role of these beliefs, culture, and norms supports the acceptance and promotion of Christianity. The customs, norms, traditions, and institutions of traditional Tangkhul society served as the foundation upon which Baptist Christianity was sustained and accepted by the natives.

In traditional Tangkhul each village was self-sufficient and independent; each village framed its own foreign policy and customary laws, and a defence system for its residents. Every village had its own distinct political and economic, and religious system. Shimray wrote, 'All the Tangkhul Naga villages were sovereign independent states' (Shimray1985:98). The village, as the largest unit, was bound together by social, political, and religious ties. M. Horam writes,

'Whether or not the village was always a social, political, and religious unit, the fact remains that it was an independent unit. The village is an independent unit in the tribe' (Horam 1975:15).

The Tangkhul village was an independent unit with no interference from outside; each village enjoyed the right of sovereignty. RR Shimray referred to the Tangkhul villages as a village-state, which was a republic in nature, to quote him.

'Every village-state pursues an independent foreign policy and implements its customary laws on all walks of life for each citizen. Each village-state had its defence system. The administration was indigenous and independent. Its economy was local and self-sufficient' (Shimray 1985:45).

The Baptist principle of autonomy holds that each local church is fully the body of Christ, not a branch of any organisation. Local congregations possess the authority to develop their own mission strategies and to appoint ministers and other leaders. Ultimately, the gathered congregation of the local church serves as the highest authority in all matters of decision-making.

According to the Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, no minister serves as a mediator between God and individuals. Baptists have long held that this vertical relationship with God also carries a horizontal dimension, where all believers act as priests and servants to one another (Leeman 2019). This affirms that each person is ultimately accountable to God alone, while recognising the Christian priesthood's shared and communal nature. As Mullins said that the great principle underlying religious liberty is the fact that God alone is Lord of the Conscience (Mullins 1912:73). It means that no human authority—whether government, church, or other institution—has the right to control, compel, or interfere with what an individual believes or how they worship. This principle supports the idea that everyone should be free to follow their own conscience in matters of faith, answering only to God.

The Baptist affirms the complete independence of the local church[9], meaning each congregation is self-governing and recognises no higher authority under Christ than itself. A Baptist local church possesses its own autonomy, meaning each congregation is self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. Baptists follow the New Testament model, which emphasises congregational self-rule and the complete independence of the local church from any external authority. This principle is supported by passages such as Acts 6:1–6, where the early church took the initiative to appoint its own leaders, and Acts 13:1–3, where the church

in Antioch, led by the Holy Spirit, commissioned missionaries without instruction from any higher authority, highlighting both self-governance and Spirit-led independence[10].

In 1980, the Baptist World Alliance adopted the statement titled *Commission on Freedom, Justice and Peace*, affirming that 'human rights are derived from God—His nature, His creation, and His command'[11]. This reflects the Baptist conviction that their autonomy is rooted in the belief in God's sovereignty.

The strength of a native (local) church depends on self-government and self-support. The support and sustenance of the local church were provided by the members of the congregation. Regardless of how few they were, every member was expected to contribute to meet the church's financial needs. William Pettigrew noted in his reports that M.K. Shimray, who served as the pastor of Phungyo Baptist Church from 1917 to 1927, was paid by the Mission for his work as a teacher in the mission school; however, the church was still responsible for paying him for his pastoral services. He wrote:

'Miksha (M.K Shimray, who was the pastor of Phungyo Baptist Church from 1917-1927) who entered the school as a raw hidden boy in 1903 with two others of the same kind who entered later and who all three became Christians in 1906 and 1907 took hold of the reigns and upto the present Miksha is still Headmaster of the school besides pastor of the church. He is paid by the Mission for his school work and his church paid him for his pastoral work' (Pettigrew1926: 33).

Converts were expected to contribute to the church in kind, and were encouraged to donate items such as chickens, eggs, vegetables, the firstborn of their animals, and the first harvest of their crops each year. The family members of the Christian were also asked to contribute in the form of *pamshum* (handful. It is a practice in which a handful of rice is set aside every morning and evening at the time of cooking by every household. The accumulated handful of rice in each Christian household was brought to the church on Sunday. The total collection of rice was sold to support the missionaries to reach out to the non-Christian or help the poor and the needy.

The missionaries tried to routinize such contributions, which were then devoted to local expansion. This was called the "Mission Fund" or *"Varewui sharuk"* (God's Portion). Established churches were expected to plant additional churches in the next village. The original churches, referred to as 'mother churches,' were responsible for supporting the spiritual—and at times financial—needs of the new church. The locals were expected to pay the pastor for the needs in the form of kind and or money. Giving of tithes[12] and thanksgiving to the church was taught to the converts at the earliest.

When the American Baptists introduced Christianity with its principles of self-support and self-governance, the Tangkhul Nagas didn't find it difficult to embrace. This was because the values of independence and self-governance had long been integral to the traditional political structure of the Tangkhul society.

6.6 Conclusion

The Tangkhul belief system is deeply woven into every aspect of life, with no clear distinction between the sacred and the secular, or the spiritual and the material. While the Tangkhuls lack a specific word for "religion," their way of life is profoundly rooted in religious values. The belief system is the strongest element in Tangkhul's traditional system, and perhaps it exercises the most influence upon the attitude and thinking of the people. Another aspect of the Tangkhul Nagas belief system was that customary and religious functions were intertwined; in other words, the social bond of each community was identical with the religious bond, the prosperity of a person largely depended upon his obedience to their customs and traditional rules. At the same time the prosperity of the community was supposed to depend upon the observance of ancestral custom. Traditions were twinned with morals. Any breaking of the custom and tradition of the village was considered as an act of blasphemy to the gods who protected them. To offend against the customs of the settlement was an offense against the gods, and therefore to menace public order.

The Tangkhul conception of God likely played a significant role in their acceptance of Christianity. This study suggests that the traditional Tangkhul religion was not antagonistic toward Christianity; instead, it provided a receptive foundation for its message. Rather than being in conflict, Christianity and traditional Tangkhul beliefs often complement one another. Their shared values and spiritual insights appear to work in harmony, each contributing to a broader understanding of humanity's spiritual journey.

The Tangkhuls have long been, and continue to be, a deeply religious people. Christianity did not introduce them to God, nor did it make them religious—God was already present among the Tangkhuls before the message of Jesus Christ was brought to them. In many ways, the actions and character of the Christian God find echoes in the traditional beliefs of the Tangkhuls. While many missionaries often proclaimed Christianity as the light that dispelled darkness, such a view oversimplifies and misrepresents the Tangkhul spiritual heritage. A more fitting metaphor would describe Tangkhul belief as a 'twilight' or the first light of dawn—out of which the full light of Christianity emerged.

Even prior to their encounter with Christian missionaries, the Tangkhuls worshipped a single, supreme God. While the transformation of their belief system is often credited to the influence of missionaries, the widespread acceptance of Christianity among the Tangkhuls can be largely attributed to the deeply philosophical nature of their existing belief and value system. Their conversion to Christianity in the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century should, therefore, be understood not merely as a result of missionary efforts, but also as a response to broader, non-missionary influences.

Endnotes

1. Kamjong district was curved out from Ukhrul district in 2016 for the administrative convenience of the state.
2. Today, there are 309 Baptist churches in Tangkhul (that includes 22 churches in Burma, Somrah under NTNBA). According to Yapoh Somra, a social activist, there are 31 Tangkhul villages in Burma. This information was provided during a telephonic interview conducted on 30 September 2025. The name of the villages are: *Phungtret (Nonrey), Layum, Pansat (Raafonbou), Mayeylung (Rashabou), Old Kokailung (Kalenaabou), Centre Kokailung, New Kokailung, Shwe Pyi Aye, Ngachan, Chagarang, Yeyjo, Old Hinkuk, New Hinkuk, Phalen, Yeyrong, Htamanti, Main town, Nongbin, New Somra, Bomba, Koki, Lungbo, Myaynigone, Old Jila, New Jila, Taya, Old Namiyubi, New Namiyupi, Old khotuk, New Khotuk, Ko Mile Chaung.*

3. The American Baptist work among the Tangkhul was started by Rev. William Pettigrew who was neither American nor a Baptist; by denomination, he was a member of the Church of England, and he came to India under the sponsorship of the Arthington.

4. *Kameo* is the collective term for a host of spirits in Tangkhul belief. They are thought to inhabit various spaces, and while not all are malevolent, many are benevolent.

5. *Interviewed on February 5, 2024* (the informant was the former Chief Judge of *Tangkhul Naga Zingtun Longphang* (Range Council of Western Tangkhul Naga).

6. Rev. William Pettigrew, reported in *The Baptist Missionary Magazine*, November 1905, quoted from the compilation work by Rev. Jonah M. Solo and Rev. Mahangthei, *Forty Years Mission in Manipur: Mission Reports of Rev. William Pettigrew*, published by Christian Literature Centre, Imphal, (nd.).

7. While invoking *Ameowo*, they prayed, *"Oh kazing ngalei kasa Akhava,"* meaning "the creator of heaven and earth," a title that also signifies the sustainer and protector of creation. *Ameowo* was also called upon to dispense justice in disputes where the truth was uncertain. In such cases, they invoked Ameowo, declaring, *"kazing ngaleina bichar sarano"* ("may heaven and earth judge between us"). Judgment was believed to be inevitable, and the guilty party would be punished through misfortune.

8. Exodus 20: 4-5

9. In this context, a local church refers to a specific congregation of believers situated in a particular village, town, or city, operating under the earthly authority of church leadership within that locality.

10. See The book of Acts: Acts 6:1–6, Acts 13:1–3

11. BWA World Congress Resolution, Declaration on Human Rights, July 11, 1980

12. Tithing, the practice of giving a portion of one's income back to God, originates in the Old Testament. Jesus reaffirms this principle in the New Testament, emphasizing generosity and acts of goodness. The firstborn of animals, fruits, or any harvest was traditionally offered to God.

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