

# Christianity and Divisions: the Case of Mao Nagas in Manipur

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**Abstract:** *The present paper focuses on the manner in which Christianity ushered in new forms of social divisions and thereby brought about transformations in the nature of social interactions in the Mao Naga society. The paper specifically examines the formation of divisions between Christians and non-Christians, Christian denominations and the role of Christianity in the division of the erstwhile Mao Naga tribe into Mao Naga tribe and Poumai Naga tribe. It may be pointed out that the point of argument in this paper is not that the teachings of Christianity or Christianity as an ethical system per se have a divisive force but that Christianity when seen as a cultural system and as it is being practiced by the tribes particularly of India's Northeast could bring about social divisions as seen in the case of the Mao Nagas in Manipur.*

## 1. Introduction

There has been a popular view that religion integrates members of the same religious community. This integrative role of religion is observable in various ways. Even in the case of Christianity in northeast India, it has been noted that Christianity has contributed to the development of a sense of tribal identity (see Downs 1994). In various ways Christianity has brought people belonging to the same tribe together and made them aware of their ethnic identity. However, it can also be observed that the same religion, that is, Christianity also brought division within a tribe as observable in the case of the Mao Naga Tribe. This division is unlike caste division or other form of divisions where hierarchical gradation is involved. The division that came about with the coming of Christianity is secular in nature although claims and contestations are involved.

It may be noted that divisive tendencies in Christian communities is not a new thing. Separatist tendencies have always been present throughout the history of Christianity (Puthenpurakal 1984). Divisive tendencies appeared even among the first followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus at the same time talks of the need for unity of the Christians. In the Bible Paul speaks of the quarrels which existed among the Corinthians,

Galatians and Colossians; the same with pastoral letters of John, Jude and the second letter of Peter (2 Peter 2: 1). Paul used strong words against the "false brethren" who wanted to create division and destroy his work (see Galatians 2: 4; 2 Corinthians 11: 13-26). Given such a tendency as the background, we find in the present time hundreds of sects and denominations among the Christians in the world.

## 2. Forms of Divisions

Mao Naga is one of the tribes of Manipur state who are predominantly found in Senapati district of the state. Till about 2003, Mao Naga Tribe comprised of the Mao Nagas and the Poumai Nagas of the present time. The first conversion among the Mao Nagas to Christianity took place in the year 1923. And subsequently in 1927, the first Christian Church was established at Punanamai village of Senapati district. Today, almost the entire population of the Mao Naga tribe got converted to Christianity.

Following the adoption of Christian religion by the Mao Nagas there has been a division in the form of Christians and non-Christians among the Tribal Mao Nagas. Besides, today we find different Christian denominations including the Baptists, the Roman Catholics, the Christian Revival, and the Seventh Day Adventists among the Maos. Again corresponding to the formation of two Churches associations namely MBCA (for the Mao Nagas) and PNBA (for the Poumai Nagas), two recognized tribes came into being. The different forms of divisions prevalent among the Mao Nagas following their conversion to Christianity may be discussed as follows:

### 2.1 Christians and Non-Christians

Horam (1977) viewed that a Naga village, in times past was a single unit for all religious, agricultural and festive purposes. With the advent of Christianity things began to change. Village split into Christian and non-Christian cliques. At times the entire Christian population of a village moved out bag and baggage to form a Christian colony. Even in all-Christian villages denominational Christianity has only helped to bring about more

disunity. This is true in the case of the Mao Nagas. From the time the Mao Nagas began to convert to Christianity, a division in the form of Christians and non-Christians came into being in a Mao Naga village. This division had (and still has) a significant implication in the nature of village social life and interaction between people. Conflicting relations between the two categories of people namely Christians and Non-Christians (Pagans) began as a result of this development. Since initially, the number of converts was small, they were tortured or harassed, and in some cases their houses were dismantled or even forced to leave the village and start a new village for themselves. Such phenomena were evident in various Mao Naga villages like Phuba, Makhan, Maiba, Pudunamai, etc. The experiences of the converts in a village dominated by non-Christians can be noted in a case study of Pudunamai Village presented as under.

#### **Case Study of Christian Conversion in Pudunamai village.**

*In 1929, the first village Christian, Neloni Salew led Adahe Ashiikho to study at Somdal, a Tangkhul Naga village where they became Christians. Finding this arrangement to be strategically convenient, Mr. N. Salew again led another party consisting of Folate Hepuni, Eshuo Ashuli, Chape Puni in 1930 to Somdal.*

*In December of 1931 a group of students from this village were baptized by Ojah Ruivah. They were Eshuo Pfukeni, Sani Heni, Daili Ashuhrii, Daili Neloni, Heshu Loli and Daili Pfukenhrii. Despite the hardships faced and the intimidating circumstances, a church was begun in 1930 by Neloni Kaisii, Adayi Folate, Neloni Nepuni, Hepuni Pfukenhrii, Daili Khekho and N. Salew. These same people along with Kaikho Daili (Khekho) had to shift to a Christian colony just above the village when the Village Chief Arii Osow and elders became unhappy with them. The colony consisted of 6 family houses and a church building. Apparently this angered the village elders the more as it must have been seen as if Christianity was certainly evil if it could bring about division in the village. On a certain genna day was proclaimed where all the men folk were asked to place themselves under oath to meet death and evil, should they not join in razing the Christian houses to the ground. The mob chanting war cries pulled down the church and other houses. They were willing to spare Kaikho Daili, being an elder, if he renounced his new faith and received the blessings of the village. He replied calmly*

*that whether he lived or died he could not reject Christ anymore. Furious the mob tore down his house and cried, "Go to your American parents. You are not Mao. You are not allowed to live in Mao area".*

*The persecuted Christians sent a telegram to the Political Agent reporting the wrecking of their church and homes. The Political Agent hastened to the village but when the converts' representative Adayi Folate stepped forward to narrate their woes, the Political Agent who warned that the Christians and the villagers should not create any trouble slapped him saying he would settle the case on return. The Political Agent who was the President of the state Darbar ordered that Christians could continue as Christians provided they observe the main theni (genna) days of non-Christians. Such were the discouragements faced by the new converts. They settled at another place called Mile after being thrown out of the village. Then being urged out from Mile even, they went for refuge to Kangpokpi centre where Adayi Folate and Neloni Nepuni were employed but the other three families were sent back.*

Till about 1980s majority of the Mao Nagas were Non-Christians and they continued to follow their traditional religion. A number of revival meetings and crusades had been organized in the later years. As a result conversion among the Mao Nagas rapidly increased. Later, when the majority of Mao Nagas became Christians, the nature of relations between Christians and Non-Christians took a different form. Christian norm became the dominant norm in the society. The Non-Christians began to feel alienated and segregated. The manner in which the non-Christians get alienated and segregated within the village can be clearly evident in the death rituals. The moment the news of death of a Christian comes, the church bell is rung to notify the village about the death. Then the people rush to the house of the deceased most of them carrying some stuffs in hand which may include sugar, tea leaves, wreathes, etc. While some people wail for the dead, some would begin to sing Christian songs to comfort the family members of the deceased. The dead body gets washed and the coffin is prepared. Mark of the cross is imprinted or placed on top of the coffin. If the death occurs after sunset, normally the burial takes place the following day before sunset. If the death occurs in early part of the day and normal rituals could be performed and if there is no any relative of the deceased staying at distant place to be waited for, the burial takes place on the same day. At the funeral the pastor for the Protestants or the priest for the Catholics, conduct

the rituals. Farewell songs from Christian hymnbook would be sung. Some scriptures would be read and after prayers are made the dead body is finally buried normally at the cemetery. In the case of the death of a non-Christian there is no ringing of the bell, no songs are sung or prayers made. And many other Christian ceremonies which are meant to comfort and console the bereaved family are denied to the non-Christians. This applies even to those who are expelled from the church. This causes fear for the non-Christians especially in villages where there is very less non-Christian population. The non-Christians or those expelled from the church thus often express their sadness saying “*iyi kathi nghu dapilemoro*” (when I die, the bell would not be rung for me).

## 2.2 Denominational Division

After the Mao Nagas converted to Christianity and different denominations came to work among them, the Mao Naga villages got divided on the lines of denominations, a form of division which was never found prior to Christianity. For many years the Baptist denomination was the only denomination found among the Mao Nagas and by 1956 the Catholics came. This was followed by the Christian Revivals and the Seventh Day Adventists. In the present time, out of the more than 30 Mao Naga villages, there is only one village (New Makhhan) which has only one church, that is, the Catholic church, all other villages have at least two or more denominations and churches. It may be pointed out that some Inter-Denominational groups like the Good Samaritans and The Laymen’s Evangelical fellowships are also emerging in Mao Naga Society and some individuals are actively propagating the faith upheld by these groups.

The manner in which the existence of different denominations within a village impacts social interactions can be observed from the way the different churches function within a village. Among the Mao Nagas, the church has become the focus of socio-cultural life of the village communities in the present time. Unlike in the past where the major part of the activities in a Mao Naga village revolved around the various socio-cultural institutions like head hunting, feast of merit, dormitory, traditional festivals, etc which made up the core of their socio-cultural life, in the present time, the Mao Nagas do a lot of activities in relation to the church to which they belong.

A church normally composes of the pastor or the priest (in the case of Catholics), the elders and the congregation. A church within the village organizes various activities involving the members of the church. There are morning and afternoon worship services on Sundays. Various other programs like Bible camps, youth camps, children’s camps, retreats, are common. Besides

there are special days like Easter Sunday, Good Friday, Christmas, New Year, Ash Wednesday, and many others. Again it is significant to note that the Church maintains a lot of funds for its functions. For raising the funds, the church organizes many activities involving the church members. And many days are spent by the members for such activities within a year. Within the church, there are women, and youth organizations. The youth organizations are called Christian Youth Endeavour (CYE) by the Protestant churches and Catholic Action (CA) by the Catholics. These groups within the church have their own codes of conduct. They maintain funds and organize various types of programs for their welfare. Such funds maintained by the church or the groups within the church are used for different purposes including salaries for those assigned with some services, for maintenance of the Church, sponsoring of evangelists or pastors in other places or churches, etc.

The point to be noted here is in all such occasions, be it worship services, celebrations, social works for raising funds, etc. the members of the Church are brought together and close interaction takes place between the members of the same church. And often the members belonging to the same denomination or church tend to be friendlier, adjustable and more accommodative to each other than with members of other denomination or churches even within the same village. They usually freely interact and interact more often among themselves than with members of other denominations. Thus, today in a Mao Naga village one finds a “stranger” who is someone from the same village as there are not much occasions for interaction for the individuals belonging to different churches in the village.

Again, it is significant to observe that Seventh-Day Adventists, a Christian denominational group, on the other hand do not observe Sunday. Instead they consider Saturday (Gregorian calendar) as their Sabbath Day and abstain from work on this day. Thus, in the present time, in a Mao village where Seventh-Day Adventists are found, one may be surprised to find some of the villagers wearing dresses for work, carrying tools/ implements and going for work on the field or with weapons and going to the jungle for hunting or for collecting firewood on Sundays, while some are well-dressed, holding the Bible/hymnbook or both and going to the church the same day and vice versa on Saturdays.

Another significant impact of the division of the village into denominational churches is its impact on the institution of marriage. The most preferred form of marriage according to the church among the Mao Nagas today is marriage between a man and a woman from the same church/denomination. Even if one of the partners is from

outside the village or even tribe, the preference applies. Marriage with a person belonging to another denomination leads to expulsion from the church especially among the protestant groups.

Even the family members along with the person who marries another belonging to other denomination are sometimes expelled. Besides, no other church member is restrained from openly following him/ her to his/ her wedding ceremony which happens in a different denominational church. There was an occasion where a church pastor prayed for a girl who belongs to his church who married someone outside her church invited him to her marriage party for which the church ousted him of his pastor-ship and appointed a new pastor in his place.

**Table: Types of marriage**

Types of Marriage:		
i	Holy Marriage	22
ii	Home Marriage	15
iii	Elopement	33
	Total	70

The above table indicates the different forms of marriage prevalent in a Mao Naga village. Elopement constitutes the most common form of marriage although it is the least approved form of marriage. This is because in order to have a church marriage one has to belong to the same church of the spouse. This leads to either elopement or home marriage. Home marriage is the practice where both the parents and the elders of the woman and the man consent to the marriage but due to the difference in denomination/church of the man and the woman, or in some cases due to the difference in religion (Christian and non Christian), the church would not solemnize the marriage, therefore it is organized without the involvement of the church.

Each denominational church in a Mao Naga Village thus functions as a separate system having its own members, norms and activities. This has significant impact on the communitarian life of a traditional Mao Naga village.

### 2.3 Division of Mao and Poumai

Oral tradition goes to say that the present Mao Naga and Poumai Naga tribes are the descendants of 'Shiipfow' (also called Shiipou by some). And the descendants of Shiipfow are known as Shiipfomei. This is commonly accepted by both the Mao Nagas and the Poumai Nagas. The Mao Nagas and the Poumai Nagas constituted Mao Naga tribe until the Poumai Nagas achieved a constitutional status of a separate tribe in 2003. The Poumai Nagas got recognized as a separate tribe following the passing of the Scheduled Caste and

Scheduled Tribes (Amendment) Act 2002 no. 10 of 2002 by the Lokh Sabha on 17<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2002 and by the Rajya Sabha on 19<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2002 which was assented by the President of India on 7<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2003 and published in the Gazette of India, dated the 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2003.

It needs to be pointed out here that every Shiipfomei (Mao Naga and Poumai Naga) village was almost a world in itself prior to their contact with the British and Christianity. Every village is engaged in feuds or head-hunting (in Mao Naga sense-war) with one another or with villages of other tribes in the past. There was no such construction as Mao and Poumai as different categories. They share common history and culture besides their common ancestor. The folk songs, folk tales, legends, traditional dresses, are commonly shared by both Mao Nagas and Poumai Nagas. Besides, the two tribes share conversable and comprehensible village dialects with the exception of some Poumai villages ( Oinam, Ngamju, Khongdai and Ngari) whose dialects are incomprehensible to other Poumai Nagas and the Mao Nagas.

The role of Christianity in the formation of two different tribes out of such a given group is significant to note. In the case of the Mao Nagas and Poumai Nagas, translation of the Bible and the hymnals in local dialect became the first controversial issue which caused the formation of two churches associations namely Poumai Naga Baptist Churches' Association (PNBA) and Mao Baptist Churches' Association (MBCA) out of the Manipur North Naga Baptist Association (MNNBA). Leaders in the MNNBA representing the Poumai group insisted on the use of some words from their village dialects in the translation of the Bible and Hymnals which was objected by the leaders representing the present Mao Naga group. For instance, it is learned that the Poumai leaders wanted the word "Rama" in place of the word "Oramai" which stands for "God" in Mao Dialect. They wanted many words of the sort to be either altered or replaced with their village dialects. This resulted in the beginning of the friction between the two groups and the subsequent formation of the two separate churches' associations.

Every association functions on the basis of common interest/interests of the component members. Churches' associations function with the same principle. The churches' associations integrate the members through organizing various programs, often rituals for the members. Durkheim sees four primary social functions of religious ritual. These include: 1. It serves a disciplinary and preparatory function- that is, ritual imposes a self discipline that is necessary for social life. Members of society need to accommodate constraints,

controls, boundaries. Learning to follow religious rituals facilitates development of this ability. 2. Ceremonial ritual provides a cohesive function- that is, it brings people together, reaffirms their common bonds and reinforces social solidarity. By doing things jointly and repetitively, the members of the group strengthen their bond of relatedness...3. It serves a revitalizing function- that is it makes members of the society aware of their common social heritage. It links them to the past: what we do has a history: we ourselves have a history... 4. It serves a euphoric function. It aids in establishing a pleasant feeling of social well-being (Johnstone 1988). In the case of the present Mao Nagas and the Poumai Nagas, the formation of two separate Churches associations went a long way in contributing to the evolution of two separate ethnic groups from the erstwhile Mao tribe.

The formation of separate churches' Association by the present Mao Nagas and Poumai Nagas went a long way in the construction and concretization of the idea of the "other". Following the formation of these churches' associations various programs which bring the members of the association together are organized separately by the associations for the member churches. Bible and Hymnbooks got translated differently. Normally, yearly calendars are maintained and circulated to the member churches of an association for all belonging to the association to follow uniformly. All such developments contributed to the evolution of the sense of belonging and 'we feeling' for those who belong to a Churches' association.

### 3. Conclusion

Christianity caused a significant impact on the processes of social interaction in Mao Naga society through the construction of divisions between Christians and non-Christians, Christian denominations and particularly, through its contribution to the formation of Mao Naga and Poumai Naga tribes from the erstwhile Mao tribe is significant. The formation of Christians and non-Christians and the establishment of different churches within the same village have significant impact on the village social life. Again the size of

population in a tribal society in a context like that of Northeast India has great social significance especially in relation to identity issues. One clear phenomenon that can be noticed in the entire Northeast region, where tribalism is a common phenomenon, is that bigger tribes normally have upper hand when it comes to ethnic relations. They are feared when they are involved in conflicting relation with smaller ethnic groups both in the past and even at present. In the modern political system too, the bigger tribes always have advantages over the smaller tribes particularly, in terms of having more voters. In the case of Mao Naga tribe of the present days, such issues developed after the majority broke away to form a different tribe namely, Poumai Naga Tribe, leaving the minority to retain the tribal name Mao Naga.

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