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Comparative History as World History: Religious Conversion in Modern India*

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THIS essay argues for the comparative method as a promising window onto the larger project of writing world history. As they apply hypotheses derived from one set of data to data drawn from altogether different historical contexts or analyze case studies taken from any time or place in order to scrutinize a given historical problem, comparative historians are especially well positioned to help free the profession from the sort of nationalist or civilizational straitjackets that have bedeviled so much history writing in the past. To the comparativist, the topic, the problem, or the process is the focus of attention, not the place. By concentrating on one such topic—religious conversion—this article illustrates how the comparative approach can be used to explore the mechanics of a worldwide process. Specifically, I raise the question of why, in modern-day cross-cultural encounters where Europeans directly administered non-European colonies, some communities in colonies converted to Christianity and others did not. This seemingly straightforward question raises some thorny methodological and theoretical issues. What, for example, is conversion? What is religion?

One may readily admit that societies continuously construct, reconstruct, and reconstitute themselves both socially and culturally,

* I wish to thank Philip D. Curtin and members of his seminar on comparative world history at Johns Hopkins University, especially David Gutelius, for useful input on an earlier draft of this paper, presented 7 November 1995. I also thank Christopher R. King and Robert E. Frykenberg for initiating my interest in the Nagas.

and that as a result no religion can be said to possess a fixed and unchanging essence. For the student of religious conversion movements, this proposition suggests that we can no longer conceptualize the phenomenon of conversion, as early generations did, in terms of the “spread” of an essentialized tradition from point A to point B—typically, from metropolis to periphery—as though it were a substance, like molasses or lava, flowing outward from some central point, engulfing and incorporating all that it passes over while itself remaining unchanged. Rather, we should adopt the perspective of the society actually undergoing change and see conversion not as passive acceptance of a monolithic, outside essence, but as “creative adaptation” of the unfamiliar to what is already familiar, a process in which the former may change to suit the latter.¹ This formulation in effect inverts the modern Western lay understanding of religious conversion, informed by generations of institutionalized Protestant effort, which tends to look at the process from the standpoint of the agent—i.e., the “missionary” who goes out and “converts” the “native” to his or her religion—rather than from that of the society undergoing change. All of this raises the interesting question of who, in the meeting of two cultures, is actually changing whom. And what, in the end, is actually changing?

If we accept the definition of religion proposed by anthropologist Melford Spiro—“an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings”²—it follows that a societywide conversion movement would involve a change in the identities of both the humans involved and the superhuman beings with whom they interact. If this is so, changes in the naming patterns of both humans and superhumans, in addition to self-ascription as reflected in census data, would appear to be our most reliable indices of religious change. With these considerations in mind, I propose to examine one of the best documented conversion movements to occur during the modern colonial encounter: the Christianization of Naga communities inhabiting the high, rugged mountains of northeastern

¹ I am borrowing the notion of “creative adaptation” from John Smail, who some years ago wrote, in a different context, that “remembering that the essence of acculturation is the acceptance of change by the acculturating group—and hence that there can be no question, in the last analysis, of forced culture change—we can bring the problem of culture change in late colonial Indonesia under the more suggestive heading of creative adaptation” (John R. W. Smail, “On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 [July 1961]: 91).

² Melford E. Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1969), p. 96.

India. In addition to a substantial body of missionary data in the form of informal correspondence, official reports, published Scriptures, and the like, we also have decennial census data for the entire period of conversion and several important ethnographies—some of them classics in anthropological literature—that were written by district officers and anthropologists who had no vested interest in the conversion movement and that cover the period both before and after the movement had gotten under way.³ One must carefully sift through all these data to locate the Nagas' own voice as they gradually changed their religious identities between 1881 and the present.

In terms of percentage of Christians to the total population, the Nagas experienced the most massive movement to Christianity in all of Asia, second only to that of the Philippines. By 1990, fully 90% of the Naga population of about 1 million was formally Christian,⁴ a culmination of a century-long movement (see table 1). Yet, as tables 2 and 3 show, the responses of the larger Naga groups were far from uniform, especially in light of the strenuous efforts foreign missionaries had made to convert them. The Ao Nagas, who were heavily proselytized between the 1880s and the 1950s, led all other Naga groups in converting to Christianity, as indicated in both census and baptismal data. The Angami Nagas, who were also heavily proselytized in the same period, responded at a far slower rate. The Sema Nagas, who were virtually ignored by missionaries in this period, like the Aos readily took on a Christian identity. The challenge to the student of comparative history, then, is to account for these very different outcomes. Moreover, Nagas as a whole converted most dramatically only after the dismantling of the colonial state and the expulsion of foreign missionaries by the newly independent government of India

³ Official missionary records relating to the movement are found at the American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, New York. Unofficial private records of the missionaries—letters, papers, translated scriptures, and memoirs—were deposited in the Bethel Theological Seminary Library, St. Paul, Minnesota. British ethnographies began with E. G. Gait's report in the 1891 census, followed by a series of important ethnographies by Naga Hills District officers: John H. Hutton's studies of the Angami and Sema Nagas appeared in 1921, and J. P. Mills's study of the Ao Nagas appeared in 1926. About the same time sociologist William C. Smith also studied the Ao Nagas. In 1931 Mills followed up his earlier studies with a monograph, "The Effect on the Tribes of the Naga Hills District of Contacts with Civilisation." Similarly, Hutton later reflected on the movement in his "Mixed Culture of the Naga Tribes," published in 1965. These studies were supplemented by those of noted anthropologists Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, who published several important monographs between 1939 and 1976, and Verrier Elwin, whose studies of the Nagas appeared in the 1960s.

⁴ Julian Jacobs, *The Nagas Hill Peoples of Northeast India: Society, Culture, and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), p. 174.

Table 1. Christian Population of Nagaland, by Census Data, 1881–1981

Year	Total Population	Christian Population	Christians as Percentage of Total
1881	94,380	3	0.003
1891	122,867	231	0.18
1901	102,402	601	0.58
1911	149,623	3,308	2.2
1921	160,960	8,734	5.4
1931	178,844	22,908	12.8
1941	189,641	34,000	17.9
1951	205,950	93,423	45.7
1961	369,200	195,588	52.9
1971	516,449	344,798	66.7
1981	774,930	621,571	80.2
1990			90.0

Source: Census of India, 1881, Assam, 22, 38; 1891, Assam, 16; 1901, 4/2:1, 9; 1911, 3/2:2, 14; 1921, 3/1:26, 61; 1931, 3/1:200; 1941, 9:2, 23, 10:8; 1951, 12/2A:2, 107; 1961, 23/2A:154; *Statistical Handbook of Nagaland*, 1973, pp. 44–46; *Census of India*, 1981, national volume, pp. 151–56. The percentage for 1990 is an approximate figure and not an official census figure. See Jacobs, *Nagas*, p. 174.

(see table 1). Therefore, blanket explanations focusing on monolithic abstractions like “colonialism” or on activities of the missionaries alone—as though these were independent, explanatory variables—clearly will not do.⁵

Each of the case studies considered here represents a movement from an ethnic to a world religion in the context of a society’s incorporation into wider social and economic relations through colonialism. In this respect they resemble conversion movements to Islam or Christianity in colonial Africa, the study of which has produced considerable discussion about religious change generally. Noteworthy has been Robin Horton’s “intellectualist theory,” which seeks to explain religious change in terms of changed experience of social relations.⁶ The

⁵ For a differing perspective, focusing more on the agency of missionaries and factors like “discourses of the imperial imagination” than on the changing cosmologies of the people actually undergoing conversion, see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), and *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

⁶ See Robin Horton, “African Conversion,” *Africa* 41, no. 2 (April 1971): 85–108; and Horton, “On the Rationality of Conversion,” *Africa* 45 (1975): 219–35, 373–99. For a discussion of the theory’s relevance for other cases of conversion in Africa, see J. D. Y. Peel, “Conversion and Tradition in Two African Societies: Ijebu and Buganda,” *Past and Present*

Table 2. Christian Share of Major Naga Groups, 1971

	Christian Percentage (Baptismal records)	Christian Percentage (Census data)
Ao	44.0	98.1
Sema	43.4	77.4
Angami	12.0	40

Source: Puthavail T. Philip, *The Growth of Baptist Churches in Nagaland*, 2nd ed. (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1983), pp. 78, 92, 110.

Table 3. Foreign Missionary Service among Ao, Sema, and Angami Nagas

	Number of Missionaries	Total Missionary Years	Inclusive Dates
Ao	17	170	1876–1954
Sema	2	7	1948–1955
Angami	7	117	1880–1955

Source: Najekhu Y. Sema, "A Study of the Growth and Expansion of Baptist Churches in Nagaland with Special Reference to the Major Tribes," master of theology thesis, Bethel Theological Seminary, 1972, p. 31.

theory argues that cosmologies of indigenous African religions typically have two tiers: an upper tier consisting of a high god who rules the macrocosm, or the world beyond the local community; and a lower tier consisting of numerous lesser superhuman beings who watch over and participate in a community's immediate natural and social worlds. While communities have more frequent and intense interactions with lesser beings of the lower tier, the high god tends to be vaguely elaborated and seldom approached. As they have increasing contact with a world beyond their microcosm, however, people tend to give greater attention to their high god, who is understood to control that larger world. This can occur, and often has occurred, within the framework of indigenous religions, quite unaffected by the influence of outside religions. But, as Horton argues, if Islamic or Christian influences happen to be "in the air" when a community is widening its

77 (November 1977): 108–42. For a recapitulation of Horton's ideas, see his *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion, and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 359–69, 374–75.

social contacts, their natural shift of attention to a high god can take the form of conversion to one of those world religions, both of which have their own highly articulated conceptions of the macrocosm and its high god. Such an outcome is especially likely when the Christian or Islamic high god is accommodated within the indigenous cosmology—for example, when that god is identified with the indigenous high god.

In short, the intellectualist theory removes from center stage the role of religious proselytizers, to focus instead on the social and cosmological dynamics experienced by the host populations themselves. “There is now a very general agreement,” wrote Horton in 1993, “that the phenomenon of ‘conversion’ can only be understood if we put the initial emphasis, not on the incoming religious messages, but rather on the indigenous religious frameworks and on the challenges they face from massive flows of novel experience.”⁷

RELIGION AND CULTURE AMONG THE NAGAS OF INDIA

By the mid-nineteenth century, most of the peoples of South Asia had been assimilated into one or another of the region’s great text-based religious traditions, whether Jain, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, or Islamic. Over the preceding centuries, as they penetrated societies living in India’s alluvial plains, these religious traditions carried with them, or associated themselves with, the characteristic traits of plains culture, such as urban life, social stratification, irrigated rice cultivation, a cash economy, centralized political authority, a stable priesthood, and a literary tradition. By the time India came under British colonial rule in the nineteenth century, however, many peoples inhabiting the outlying, forested hill tracts of the subcontinent still remained untouched, or lightly touched, by such text-based religious traditions and the cultural traits associated with them.

Among these peoples were the natives of the Naga Hills—today, Nagaland.⁸ Roughly the size of Connecticut, this region is separated from Burma to the east and the Indian state of Assam to the west by massive mountain ridges. In the mid-nineteenth century, its inhab-

⁷ Horton, *Patterns of Thought*, p. 315.

⁸ In an earlier article I explored aspects of this subject as it related to Nagas as a whole. See Richard M. Eaton, “Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876–1971,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 11, no. 1 (1984): 1–43. While drawing on much of the material that appeared in that article, the present paper incorporates more recent literature and addresses comparative and theoretical issues that did not arise in the earlier piece.

itants, the Nagas, were divided into some fourteen major linguistic groups, most of which traditionally practiced shifting, or “slash and burn” (*jhum*) agriculture. Economically self-sufficient, these people never developed sustained trade relations with the plains peoples, nor were they familiar with Assamese, the language of the closest literate culture. Even within the hills the various Naga languages, though all belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, were mutually unintelligible, so that communication between communities of villages had to take place in sign language.⁹ Their mountaintop villages, moreover, were fortified by defensive stockades. Institutionalized intervillage warfare and the cultural values on which it rested, which included headhunting,¹⁰ had the effect of narrowing very considerably the Nagas’ vision of the world.¹¹

Hemmed in both by huge mountain ranges and by their own village stockades, the Nagas developed religious systems that were very locality-specific—that is, highly elaborated with respect to the microcosm in which villagers lived. In 1891, some fifteen years after British armies gained a secure foothold in the Naga Hills, we get the first outside reports of Naga religion. In the census of India for that year, E. A. Gait wrote, “There is a vague but very general belief in some one omnipotent being, who is well disposed towards men, and whom therefore there is no necessity for propitiating. Then come a number of evil spirits, who are ill disposed towards human beings, and to whose malevolent interference are ascribed all the woes which afflict mankind. To these, therefore, sacrifices must be offered. These malevolent spirits are sylvan deities, spirits of the trees, the rocks and streams, and sometimes also of the tribal ancestors.”¹²

This religious cosmology is comparable to the sort of indigenous religious systems Horton found among preliterate societies in nine-

⁹ John H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas* (1921; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 291.

¹⁰ As Fürer-Haimendorf remarked, “a Naga village could not even ideally remain at peace as long as there prevailed the belief that the occasional capture of a human head was essential for maintaining the fertility of the crops and the well-being of the community” (Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, “Morality and Prestige among the Nagas,” in *Anthropology and Archaeology: Essays in Commemoration of Verrier Elwin, 1907–64*, edited by M. C. Pradhan [London: Oxford University Press, 1969], p. 156).

¹¹ “To the Naga,” wrote Fürer-Haimendorf, “mankind appears as sharply divided between the small circle of his co-villagers and clansmen, from whom he expects assistance and to whom he is bound by a number of obligations, and the entire outward world consisting of the people of his own tribe living in other villages as well as the people of neighbouring tribes, who are his potential enemies and also potential victims of headhunting” (Fürer-Haimendorf, “Morality and Prestige,” p. 156).

¹² Census of India, 1891 (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), Assam, 1:93.

teenth-century West Africa. Again one finds a high god who rules the universe and who, though benevolent, is but vaguely understood and seldom approached because of his perceived remoteness from society's everyday concerns. Below him are a host of minor spirits who are more sharply perceived and are given far greater attention because they control such concrete phenomena as disease, crops, rain, or human fertility. The Nagas regarded these spirits as generally malevolent, or at least whimsical, and so appeased them in the form of sacrifices of pigs, fowl, or other living things, to keep them from bringing havoc upon individuals or whole villages. This required the services of village specialists, some interacting with those spirits who could affect the village as a whole, and others with spirits affecting individuals.

IMPERIALISM AND CONVERSION AMONG THE NAGAS

In broad outline, then, this was the society that for more than a century encountered and interacted with both British imperialists and American missionaries. Seeking to protect its infant tea industry, the English East India Company had been drawn into the Naga Hills following its annexation of Assam in 1842. By the 1870s the British had persuaded the Nagas to accept in their midst an English officer who would arbitrate disputes not only between the Nagas and the British, but also among the Nagas themselves. In 1878 the British established a political officer in their headquarters at Kohima, in the Angami country; by 1889 the Ao country to the north had been brought under British administration; and in the early 1900s colonial rule was extended to include the Sema country (fig. 1).

Christian proselytization in the Naga Hills grew apace with, and under the umbrella of, the British Raj. The area's first district officer, Captain Johnstone, later recalled that in 1875, "I pointed out that the Nagas had no religion; that they were highly intelligent and capable of receiving civilisation; that with it they would want a religion, and that we might just as well give them our own, and make them in that way a source of strength, by thus mutually attaching them to us. . . . It cannot be doubted, that a large population of Christian hillmen between Assam and Burmah, would be a valuable prop to the State."¹³ Although Johnstone had recommended that a "competent clergyman of the Church of England" be deputed to the Hills, it was ultimately

¹³ Sir James Johnstone, *Manipur and the Naga Hills* (1896; reprint, Delhi: Vivek, 1971), pp. 43, 44.

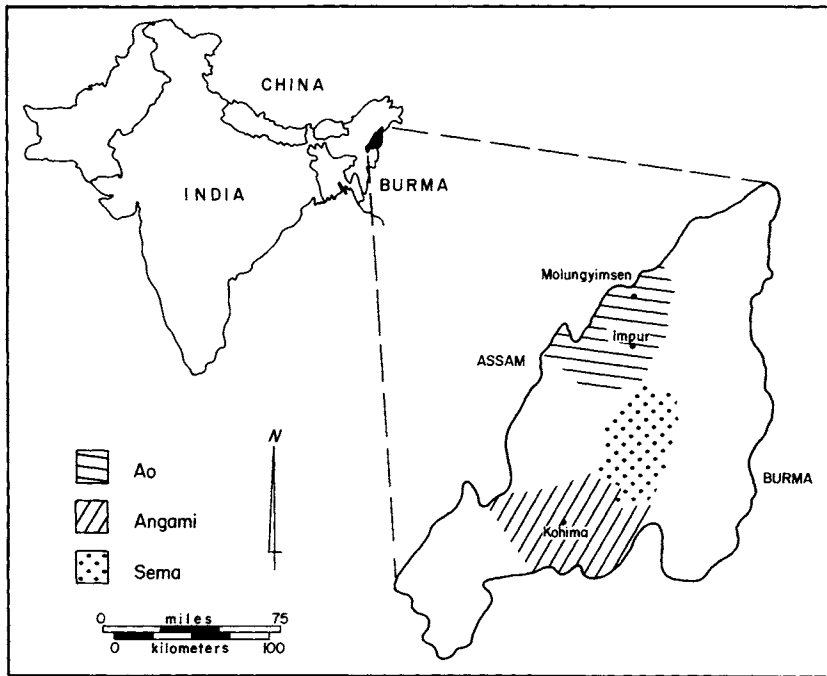


FIGURE 1. The Naga Hills in 1931.

American Baptists who were allotted the region for proselytization.¹⁴ In 1872 Rev. E. W. Clark reached the hills accompanied by an Assamese Christian who had learned the Ao language and through whom he began preaching in Ao villages. But Clark's insistence that converts observe Sunday as a "day of rest" interfered with the rhythm and routine of Naga village life, since all work—hunting, sowing, and harvesting—was done on a communal basis. So in 1876, bowing to pressure from the village council, Clark and his tiny band of fifteen followers abandoned the stockaded walls of the first village in which he had been preaching and established a separate, all-Christian village named Molungyimsen.¹⁵ Encouraged by Clark's initial success, the American Baptist Mission Board sent in three more missionaries dur-

¹⁴ The best accounts of Christian missions in the Naga Hills are Joseph Puthenpurakal, *Baptist Missions in Nagaland: a Study in Historical and Ecumenical Perspective* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1984); and Puthuvail Thomas Philip, *The Growth of Baptist Churches in Nagaland*, 2nd ed. (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1983).

¹⁵ "Families from other villages gradually came in and we soon numbered a hundred houses," recalled Clark's wife Mary. "Gradually other villages, seeing our prosperity, began

ing the final decades of the century. But two of them, arriving fresh from the United States and adamantly opposed to the compromises with Naga culture that Clark had allowed among his converts, resolved to move mission activities further into the interior, establishing a station at a new village named Impur. For his part, Clark remained until 1911 in Molungyimsen where, almost in the manner of an Ao village elder, he shepherded his flock and tirelessly worked at his many translation projects.

The Impur Mission represented a more systematic and rationalized effort to transform Naga culture. The same was true of a second Christian beachhead, the Kohima Mission, established in 1878 by C. D. King in the heart of the Angami country, some eighty-five miles southwest of Impur. Down to 1954, when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru expelled all foreign missionaries from India, these two stations remained the centers from which American missionaries operated. Together, they promoted a good deal of culture change, only part of which was religious. For example, linguists at the two stations, eager to place vernacular translations of the New Testament in circulation as quickly as possible, reduced the various Naga languages to written forms and built up the first written literature Naga peoples possessed. This in turn simplified the linguistic landscape, for by selecting from among many dialects of a language just one for reduction to Roman script, the missionaries doomed most other dialects to oblivion. As literacy became the key to education, which in turn, in the newly established colonial context, became the key to social mobility, Ao Nagas realized the advantage of learning the dialect selected by Clark and his successors as the "standard" dialect. The same phenomenon occurred among the Angami, the Sema, and other Naga peoples.

The principal institution facilitating both education and conversion was the village school. In 1905 the chief commissioner of Assam summoned the second missionary posted in Kohima, Sidney Rivenburg, to discuss the establishment of village schools in the Naga Hills.¹⁶ Like the missionaries, government officials also wished to promote literacy, prohibit intervillage warfare, and break down barriers that isolated Nagas from fellow Naga groups. Their further motive, of course, was to create a cadre of clerks to run the revenue and judicial adminis-

asking for teachers, and the Nagas not being sufficiently advanced, a few Assamese Christians were called for evangelistic and educational work" (Mary M. Clark, *A Corner in India* [Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications Society, 1907], p. 91).

¹⁶ Sidney W. Rivenburg, *The Star of the Naga Hills* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1941), pp. 96–97. By this time Rivenburg had already translated a primer and books on arithmetic and hygiene, as well as parts of the New Testament, into Angami.

tration in the newly formed Naga Hills District. But unlike the missionaries, district officers, interested in maintaining peace and security, wished to avoid interfering with Naga culture, especially religion. After all, Englishmen in India had bitter memories of the 1857 revolt, which had followed a period of aggressive British interference in Indian culture in the name of "reform."

But as to the desirability of educating the Nagas, mission and government were of one mind. The result was a three-way cooperative effort: villages desiring a school provided the building and the rice for a teacher, the government paid the teacher's salary and financed the printing of textbooks, and the missionaries wrote the texts and trained the teachers at Kohima or Impur. Pupils completing three years in village schools could then leave their villages and enroll as secondary school pupils in either the Kohima or Impur Mission Training Schools.¹⁷ There, students learned carpentry, blacksmithing, typewriting, or rice terrace cultivation, in addition to pursuing regular academic courses. From there they typically joined government service or returned to villages to become primary school teachers themselves.¹⁸ By this time, however, they had been exposed to considerable Christian influence, such that in 1923 the Baptist Foreign Mission Society could note with satisfaction that "the government can secure the service of practically none but Christians as teachers."¹⁹ Moreover, missionaries circumvented the teacher training schools' secular façade (necessitated by the fact of partial government support) by counting Sundays as one of the required schooldays, so that students had to attend church services to get credit for regular school attendance.²⁰ Too, the vast majority of the staff at the training schools were themselves Naga converts.²¹ Consequently, when villages requested teachers for what was typically their first local school, they were usually sent a Christian youth whom the mission paid, in addition to the government salary, a sum of about four

¹⁷ American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, *96th Annual Report* (Boston: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1910), p. 78.

¹⁸ Papers of J. E. Tanquist, Bethel Theological Seminary Library, St. Paul, Minnesota, MS, 1935, p. 223b (hereafter cited as Tanquist Papers). By 1923 the mission ran 208 schools, chiefly primary, serving 5,438 pupils. American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, *109th Annual Report* (Valley Forge, Pa.: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1923), p. 113.

¹⁹ American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, *109th Annual Report*, p. 115.

²⁰ "There may be some complaint," J. E. Tanquist admitted, "because directly religious work is carried out in a Government-supported religious-community school. But what then? Would it not be better to lose that support than to be in any way hindered from carrying out our God-given task of winning souls for Christ?" (Tanquist Papers, MS, 1923, pp. 117–18).

²¹ Tanquist Papers, MS, 1942, p. 300.

dollars a month to preach in addition to doing his schoolwork.²² In his field report for 1937, the senior missionary at Kohima summed it up nicely: "With a mission school there immediately follows a Sunday School and out of that grows a church. The history of many a church in Assam can be traced back to an investment of say, forty dollars per year and the placement of a Christian teacher in an otherwise unevangelized village."²³

But what did these missionaries mean by conversion? In theory, they might have been content with Nagas accepting Christian baptism and simply abandoning, as one of them put it, "the miserable worship patterns handed down to them by their ancestors."²⁴ But in practice they called for a total cultural transformation. As Mary Clark wrote, "the Nagas, once civilized and Christianized, will make a manly, worthy people."²⁵ Accordingly, early converts had to wear the Assamese jacket and body cloth,²⁶ while later converts wore European dress—long shirts, mauve coats, khaki shorts, or white blouses imported from the plains.²⁷ Missionaries also forbade male converts to live in the *morung*, the village guardhouse and lodge where young men of the same exogamous clan slept before they married and moved into separate lodgings. Located near the village gates, a *morung* was also the focal point for the elaborate sequence of feasts that marked the Nagas' ritual year and that served as a channel of social mobility, since such feasts raised a sponsor's position in the eyes of his peers.²⁸ Finally, the Baptists strictly prohibited converts from drinking rice beer, which was central to traditional feasts.²⁹ In fact, the missionaries developed such an obsession with the issue that nondrinking, noted a district officer in 1931, "is often regarded as the outstanding mark of a Christian."³⁰

²² Tanquist Papers, MS, 1934, p. 204.

²³ Tanquist Papers, MS, 1937, p. 249.

²⁴ Tanquist Papers, MS, 1922, p. 126.

²⁵ Clark, *Corner in India*, p. 33.

²⁶ Clark, *Corner in India*, p. 54.

²⁷ But on this latter point the government—always desiring not to rock the cultural boat—intervened and in 1925 refused to allow the mission to start work in a new area until it agreed not to impose Western clothing on converts. Tanquist Papers, MS, 1925, p. 135.

²⁸ Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, *Return to the Naked Nagas* (New York: Vikas, 1976), pp. 47–50.

²⁹ Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf wrote that "to the Ao a feast without rice beer is unthinkable" (*Return to the Naked Nagas*, p. 48) and that "without rice beer the life of the Angami is little more than a bad dream" (*The Naked Nagas*, 2nd rev. Indian ed. [Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1962], p. 7).

³⁰ J. P. Mills, "The Effect on the Tribes of the Naga Hills District of Contacts with Civilisation," in *Census of India, 1931*, vol. 3, part 1, report, appendix A (Calcutta, 1932), p. iv.

Most foreign missionaries in the Naga Hills were Prohibitionist American Baptists who understood religion in strongly moral terms and consequently saw conversion as a conscious moral turnabout, of which markers like Western dress or abstinence from alcohol were outward signs. To be sure, some missionaries seem to have realized that Naga religion could not simply be isolated and excised out of the matrix of Naga culture in which it was embedded.³¹ But most paid little attention to that aspect. “These people are very interesting,” wrote one of them in 1913, “but that is not the main purpose of our being here, simply to study these interesting people; but we are here to strive to help them to something better.”³² Not surprisingly, then, missionaries and Nagas held rather different notions of what constituted conversion—a difference that is reflected in discrepancies in the data on the size of the Christian population. Owing to their strict criteria of what constituted a convert, the missionaries’ baptismal tabulations always lagged behind the much larger Christian “community,” which comprised those who, regardless of what the missionaries thought, considered themselves Christian and told the census officials so (see table 2).

Given the stringent demands of the missionaries, on the one hand, and the extent to which Naga religion was integrated with the rest of Naga life, on the other—and given, too, the colonial regime’s growing dismay with the missionaries’ meddling in Naga culture—how did the conversion movement take place? Why did it occur at all? Certainly, considering the negative correlation between the incidence of conversion and the presence of missionaries in either time or space (see tables 1–3), the distribution of foreign missionaries can hardly tell the whole story. Nor can one make a convincing case that Nagas were “rice Christians”—that is, that they converted in order to acquire some nonreligious benefit.³³ Further, one finds no correlation between conversion and the sort of severe decline in economic standards that might

³¹ Tanquist once cited the “cleavages and animosities incident to the spread of Christianity among people who are closely knit together in village life and whose very village customs constitute their old religion” (Tanquist Papers, MS, 1936, p. 239).

³² William C. Smith in *Standaret*, 31 December 1913, cited in Tanquist Papers, MS, 1913, p. 75.

³³ One British official theorized that exemption from payment of village taxes, granted to converts by the government in 1905, promoted the movement to Christianity. But potential converts would have had to weigh the benefits of nonpayment of several baskets of rice against the severe disapprobation of the other villagers on whom they depended for economic, political, and social support. Moreover, the truly large conversion movement did not begin until four decades after that exemption was put in place. Hutton, *Angami Nagas*, pp. 373–74.

have placed the hill people in a state of "relative deprivation," such that religious change would have ridden the back of a movement for socioeconomic reform.

Here we may turn to Horton's intellectualist theory, which considers how indigenous cosmologies interacted with widening social relations. The Nagas clearly represent a previously insulated society, which during the first half of the twentieth century became dramatically drawn into a wider world, making many Nagas aware of a macrocosm lying beyond their local communities. Some were physically uprooted from the Hills and placed in drastically alien environments. For example, some 4,000 Nagas were formed into a Labour Corps during World War I and sent to France, where they saw "how the great civilised nations fought for their ends and interests while Nagas were condemned as barbarous for their headhunting ways."³⁴ Back in the Naga Hills, meanwhile, kerosene lanterns replaced reed torches, buttons replaced shells, safety matches replaced friction devices, steel needles replaced bamboo needles, and firearms replaced spears.³⁵ Signaling the region's first economic integration with a plains civilization, metal currency in the form of the silver rupee replaced unhulled rice as the medium of commercial exchange. At the same time new scourges, such as tuberculosis and venereal diseases, were introduced from the plains.³⁶

Without question, colonial rule destabilized venerable Naga institutions. As a result of imperial criminalization of headhunting and intervillage warfare, noted one observer, the Nagas' ethos of a rigid discipline weakened, "and the village chiefs, who were the leaders of the community organized on a war footing, started losing their hold over their younger warriors."³⁷ Indeed, it was these same "younger warriors" who were responding most readily to Christian teachings as presented to them in village schools,³⁸ leaving village women as the ones most devoted to local crop deities.³⁹ Moreover, the face-to-face, fluid nature

³⁴ Asoso Yonuo, *The Rising Nagas* (Delhi: Vivek Publishing House, n.d.), p. 125; cited in Kevikyekiellie Linyii, *The Angami Church since 1950* (Bangalore: United Theological College, 1983), p. 23.

³⁵ William C. Smith, *The Ao Naga Tribe of Assam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), pp. 180–81.

³⁶ Mills, "Effect on the Tribes," p. 11. The last point recalls George Orwell's characterization of the British Raj as "Pox Britannica."

³⁷ V. K. Anand, *Nagaland in Transition* (New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1967), p. 93.

³⁸ "On the Mission Field," noted Tanquist, "the spiritual reform movements nearly always originate with the young people" (Tanquist Papers, MS, 1934, p. 203).

³⁹ Mary Clark to J. W. Murdock, 5 August 1880, American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, Rochester, N.Y., correspondence, reel FM-59.

of precolonial village authority—whether vested in chiefs, as in the more autocratic Sema villages, or in village councils, as in the more representative Angami villages—was gradually undermined and replaced by a fixed, written authority in the form of codified laws. Now, should aggrieved villagers be dissatisfied with the decisions of their local chiefs or councils, they could seek redress with a higher authority, the district magistrate.

Yet it would be wrong to see Naga conversions simply as a function of social change or of “colonialism,” for while all Nagas experienced the sort of disruptions mentioned above, their responses to Christianity varied considerably from group to group. To explain these different outcomes, we need to examine the groups individually, paying especially close attention to differences in their precontact cosmologies, to the different ways those cosmologies interacted with their changing social and political worlds, and to the different ways Christian doctrines interacted with Naga cosmologies. In short, we must practice comparative history. Three of the largest communities, about whom we have the richest data, are here considered in turn: the Ao, the Sema, and the Angami Nagas.

THE AO CASE

The supreme deity among the Ao Nagas, Lungkijingba, was believed to live high in the sky and to be concerned with the ultimate destiny of all humans. But, as the missionary-sociologist William Smith noted in 1925, this god was considered to be so remote that his effective contact was limited to other deities and did not extend to humans.⁴⁰ Ao villagers did not even make offerings to this high god. Smith remarked, “He is represented as sitting upon the dome of his stone house as on a throne, where he pulls to pieces certain leaves, pronouncing on each piece a fate or destiny. The spirits of men come and each one picks up a piece of leaf, and the fate pronounced upon it becomes his lot in life. But since there is no mark on the piece of leaf, telling that particular destiny it portends, *the great god does not know what is to be the lot of each man*; it resolves itself into a mere blind game of chance.”⁴¹ Less remote in Ao cosmology was Lizaba, considered the creator of the

⁴⁰ Smith, *Ao Naga Tribe*, p. 78.

⁴¹ Smith, *Ao Naga Tribe*, p. 78 (emphasis added). Smith is here summarizing observations made in Edward W. Clark, *Ao-Naga Dictionary* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1911), pp. 360–62.

earth and the deity in control of the rains, and consequently of the food supply for the dry rice-growing Aos. He also commanded sickness and disease. Living in closer relation to human society, Lizaba seems to have been more clearly defined than Lungkijingba, and accordingly most village offerings and sacrifices were made to him. Such rituals were directed by village priests called *putirs*, who were chosen "by public opinion" from among the eldest males of each clan in an Ao village. They were compensated for their services on the occasion of village feasts. While *putirs* dealt with the village as a whole, another class of specialists, *arasentsurs*, communicated with the spirit world on behalf of individuals, especially for the purpose of exorcising malevolent spirits.⁴²

Lungkijingba and Lizaba were both *tsungrems*, "spirits," who, when given a proper name or identified with a place, were endowed with power and personality. Thus, Ao cosmology also contained sky spirits (*anung tsungrem*); house-site spirits (*kimung tsungrem*), who were fixed beings that haunted the same house-site no matter who occupied it; house-spirits (*ki-tsung tsungrem*), who were attached to individuals and moved with them wherever they went; and jungle ghosts (*arem tsungrem*), understood as malevolent dwarf creatures.⁴³ As the swarms of spirits that inhabited the everyday world of the Aos were often harmful, elaborate ceremonies were required to keep them at bay.⁴⁴ Moreover, these spirits were closely identified with the topography of the Ao country. As E. W. Clark noted in 1911, "Lizaba was accredited to have been the world maker. But the Aos never travelled much beyond their own country and their horizon was supposed to embrace all there was of the world, so though *Lizaba* has the credit of being world maker, all he did (by tradition) was to level the surface of the plain of the Assam Valley."⁴⁵ Similarly, the Aos' ancestors were thought to have come out of the earth at six stones located at a particular spur on the right bank of the Dikhu River,⁴⁶ while the path to paradise was identified with a particular long ridge that sloped west to east.⁴⁷ In sum, the

⁴² J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 244.

⁴³ Mills, *Ao Nagas*, pp. 222–23; Smith, *Ao Naga Tribe*, pp. 77–78.

⁴⁴ Wrote the ethnographer J. P. Mills, "On their good will largely depend a man's health and happiness. They are everywhere—in the village, in the field, in the jungle, by streams, in trees, and, most favourite haunt of all, in the huge boulders which were so numerous in the Ao country" (Mills, *Ao Nagas*, p. 216).

⁴⁵ Clark, *Ao-Naga Dictionary*, p. 350.

⁴⁶ Mills, *Ao Nagas*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Hutton, *Angami Nagas*, p. 186. Moreover, Mills observed that Ao spirits, or *tsungrem*, "are regarded as resembling the people of the locality in which they live. For instance, should a sick man be told by the 'medicine man' whom he consults that it is a *tsungrem* of

precontact Ao cosmology was characterized by a vaguely conceived, seldom approached, and generally otiose high god (Lungkijingba), below whom were a large number of well-defined, frequently approached, and territorially identified spirits that watched over and participated in the Aos' immediate microcosm.

How, then, did the missionaries deal with the Ao religion? For all their condemnation of Naga ritual and social life, the missionaries were extraordinarily accommodating toward Naga doctrine and cosmology, in which they and their Naga converts systematically sought points of entry for Christian terms and ideas.⁴⁸ In fact the terminological strategies adopted by foreign missionaries and their native assistants in the earliest translations of scripture proved crucial for the success or failure of accommodating Christianity to indigenous religions. It was these native assistants who worked to assimilate Christian ideas, names, and terms into the Nagas' own linguistic, and hence religious, universe.⁴⁹ One missionary who had supervised several translation projects recalled that the Nagas "rather resent the idea of introducing an outside word, as they are proud of their own language and think it is deep enough and that they can find the expressions necessary, when you get to working with these pundits."⁵⁰

Let us examine what the missionaries and "these pundits" did. In translating *God* into Ao Scripture, Clark and his native assistants did not use the term for any single Ao deity—neither the high god Lung-

the Pham country [another Naga group, to the east] which is holding his soul to ransom, he will offer a little thread of the kind which the Pham buy keenly from the Aos" (Mills, *Ao Nagas*, p. 216).

⁴⁸ "The old religion of these people furnishes a splendid basis for Christianity," wrote E. W. Clark in 1881. "The fundamental ideas are there, perverted it is true, but there. And most of the needful terms are there" (E. W. Clark to J. W. Murdock, 10 March 1881, American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, Rochester, N.Y., correspondence, reel FM-59). For her part, Mary Clark was certain that the Aos believed in an individual soul and an afterlife, that they had a notion of sin and a need for salvation, and that they had an apocalyptic vision that approximated Judgment Day (Clark, *Corner in India*, pp. 57–63).

⁴⁹ Reverend Clark, who compiled an Ao-English dictionary, was himself pivotal in the process, bringing out an Ao translation of Matthew in 1883. A complete Ao New Testament appeared in 1929, translated by Rev. R. B. Longwell and Rev. William Smith, "with the help of Ao Christians." Similarly, the first Angami New Testament appeared in 1927, translated by Reverend Tanquist, assisted by several Angami converts. In 1928 Tanquist also directed translation of Mark into the Sema language, assisted by another Naga convert; the complete Sema New Testament, published in 1950, was revised by three other converts. Similarly, the first Gospels to appear in the Lotha language, in the 1930s, were prepared by three Lotha converts. J. S. M. Hooper, *Bible Translation in India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 166–67.

⁵⁰ Reverend Tanquist, interviewed by Christopher R. King in St. Paul, Minnesota, 11 May 1968.

kijingba, nor the important creator and crop deity Lizaba. Nor were foreign terms like *Jehovah* used. Rather, Clark's Ao New Testament translated both *kyrios*, "Lord, master," and *theos*, "god, God," by the Ao word *tsungrem*, which as we have seen denotes "a spirit" not endowed with specific attributes. J. P. Mills, who lived among the Aos as a district official from 1917 to 1937, considered this a risky translation because "*tsungrem* means a spirit attached to a specific place, of a character which at best is neutral and is always liable to be hostile."⁵¹ But a *tsungrem* was attached to a place only when a word designating that place was attached to the word; otherwise, it was a generic term, a neutral concept with no specific attributes. By using this term for *God*, then, the missionaries effectively pulled together what the entire Ao pantheon had in common—its "spiritness," or "*tsungrem*-ness"—and endowed that notion with the power and universality of the biblical supreme deity. Moreover, as in English or other vernaculars, *God* was always capitalized as *Tsungrem* in Roman script, while the generic term *god* (as in Acts 14:11) was left in the lower case, *tsungrem*.

At the topmost level of the Ao cosmology, then, these initiatives effectively replaced Lungkijingba, the high god who was only vaguely perceived, with a far more sharply defined universalization of a generic term. And they simply liquidated the entire lower tier of lesser spirits. These developments correspond precisely to Max Weber's notion of religious rationalization—that is, the process of elaborating and clarifying the supreme power of a single, universal deity at the expense of all others.⁵² Additionally, by using *Tsungrem* instead of foreign terms like *Jehovah* in early editions of Christian scripture, Clark used, and in fact enlarged upon, an indigenous conceptual category, rather than imposing an alien one.⁵³ Although later, more conservative, missionaries opposed this accommodationist strategy and even

⁵¹ Mills, *Ao Nagas*, p. 367.

⁵² "The decisive consideration," wrote Weber, "was and remains: who is deemed to exert the stronger influence on the individual in his everyday life, the theoretically supreme god or the lower spirits and demons? . . . The process of rationalization (*ratio*) favoured the primacy of universal gods; and every consistent crystallization of a pantheon followed systematic rational principles to some degree, since it was always influenced by professional sacerdotal rationalism or by the rational striving for order on the part of secular individuals" (Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, translated by Ephraim Fischoff [Boston: Beacon Press, 1964], pp. 20, 22).

⁵³ This, of course, is precisely what the Apostle Paul did when preaching before the elite of Athens in the first century. "Men of Athens," he declared, "I have seen for myself how extremely scrupulous you are in all religious matters, because I noted, as I strolled around admiring your sacred monuments, that you had an altar inscribed: to an Unknown God. Well, the God whom I proclaim is in fact the one whom you already worship without knowing it" (Acts 17:22–23).

tried to reverse it, the tradition established by Clark and his native assistants has persisted to the present day.⁵⁴

This translation strategy was not by itself a cause of conversion. Yet it is significant that Clark and his assistants were elaborating the nature and power of an indigenous conception of a high god at the very time—the early decades of the twentieth century—when Ao Nagas had begun paying more attention to the upper tier of their religious cosmology. This new focus of attention was one of the intellectual consequences of the dramatic integration of Ao society with the outside world that had come with colonial rule. “You should hear their exclamation of wonder as they turn the pages of ‘Harper’s Weekly,’” wrote Mary Clark in 1907 from the midst of the Ao country.

They are in a world of which they never dreamed. When our missionary map from Boston was hung up before them, ‘Wah! wah! wah! father, what does it speak?’ uttered in reverent exclamation gave opportunity for such a lesson as led old Deacon Scubungallumba to drop his head and mutter almost under his breath, ‘Ish! Ish! how great we have thought ourselves, as though we were the big part of all creation.’⁵⁵

This passage speaks to the cognitive disruption that accompanied the intrusion of colonial rule among a once isolated community. Clearly, the confines of the Aos’ experienced world became suddenly and drastically enlarged with this intrusion, such that what yesterday had constituted the entire universe, bounded by a distant mountain range, was now construed as but a speck on a vast globe.

This enlargement of the experienced world created a space for an enlargement of a conception of a high god understood as underpinning and controlling that world. Meanwhile, Aos began paying less attention to the many lesser *tsungrem*s who occupied their former cosmology. These spirits, whose authority had been limited to the much smaller domain of everyday village life, now became otiose or simply irrelevant. Even intermediate gods seemed to have lost their grip on

⁵⁴ In 1945 Tanquist supervised a revised Ao New Testament that replaced *Tsungrem* with *Jihova*. But, as the veteran missionary later admitted, “the people were not enthusiastic about the change, to say the least,” and they continued to use the Ao term *Tsungrem* (Tanquist to A. F. Merrill, administrative secretary, Public Relations Department, American Baptist Convention, New York City, 8 March 1960, copy in author’s possession). In Tanquist’s personal copy of an Ao hymnal in which *God* was consistently rendered as *Tsungrem*, the latter term was crossed out in pencil and replaced by *Jihova* (*Otzütajung Ken* [Ao Naga Hymnal] [Calcutta: B. I. Anderson, n.d.], in Bethel Theological Seminary Library, St. Paul, Minn.).

⁵⁵ Clark, *Corner in India*, p. 108.

the world. Before the British annexation of the Ao country in 1889, Lizaba, the god of the rains and of sickness, was regularly importuned in villagewide celebrations. In those days, Lizaba was believed to manifest himself several times a year, visiting certain villages where he would bring portents of coming events, such as smallpox, good harvests, or war. But since the advent of British rule, it was noted in 1925, "Lizaba has not appeared. They say he has gone on a journey to the ends of the world."⁵⁶

Further favoring the rise of Tsungrem to supremacy over the entire Ao cosmology was his association with the new and potent power of the written word: the Aos' first written literature was biblical Scripture. In 1883 E. W. Clark managed to procure a secondhand American printing press, which, he noted, took "all the men of the village about a week" to haul up to his mission village of Molungyimsen. There, he at once began printing a catechism, a biography of Joseph, and the Gospel of Matthew, which he had translated into the Ao language and prepared for printing in Roman script.⁵⁷ Clark seems to have understood that the susceptibility of preliterate groups to Christian Scripture—and the corresponding imperviousness of Hindus, Muslims, and others already exposed to scriptural authority—was related to the power of written authority per se.⁵⁸ As J. D. Y. Peel noted in his study of conversion among the Yoruba of modern Nigeria:

In non-literate societies . . . the past is perceived as entirely servant of the needs of the present, things are forgotten and myth is constructed to justify contemporary arrangements; there are no dictionary definitions of words. . . . In religion there is no sense of impersonal or universal orthodoxy of doctrine; legitimate belief is as a particular priest or elder expounds it. But where the essence of religion is the Word of God, where all arguments are resolved by an appeal to an unchangeable written authority. . . . religion acquires a rigid basis. . . . [Religion] comes to be thought of as a system of rules, emanating from an absolute and universal God, which are quite external to the thinker, and to which he must conform and bend himself, if he would be saved.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Smith, *Ao Naga Tribe*, p. 79.

⁵⁷ Puthenpurakal, *Baptist Missions in Nagaland*, p. 81.

⁵⁸ As early as 1876 Clark wrote that "it is a well-recognized fact in India that aboriginal tribes like the Nagas who are not Hindu, Mussalman or Buddhists constitute by far the most promising field of missionary labor in India" (E. W. Clark to J. W. Murdock, 17 May 1876, American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, Rochester, N.Y., correspondence, reel FM-59).

⁵⁹ J. D. Y. Peel, "Syncretism and Religious Change," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10 (1967-68): 139-40.

Lizaba may disappear over the mountains; forest spirits may rise or fall in their capacity to do harm depending on a people's ad hoc experiences with them; potent *tsungrems* of one generation may be ignored by the next. But Tsungrem, the one deity preached by the Christians, was seen as possessing a fixed and unalterable status in the cosmos. His commands and promises, frozen in time by the power and the technology of the written word, could not easily be ignored or forgotten.

In short, we see here a fusion of literacy and religion. Literate young men, who in an earlier generation would have been headhunting warriors, were now becoming primary school teachers in villages distant from their own, where they would read to other villagers the unchangeable Word of God and display the life of Christ with color slides illuminated by lanterns.⁶⁰ As one missionary-translator reported, "The few who can read will recite all the words to the many who are illiterate."⁶¹ In this way the incorporation of the Naga Hills into a larger political and economic universe—a function of colonialism—was paralleled by the region's incorporation into a literate universe, and by the Aos' own incorporation of a more powerful and permanent conception of a high god into their cosmology. For Tsungrem was not an alien deity imposed upon the Aos from the outside; it was their own generic term made universal by the Bible's message, and made permanent by the medium of print technology.

THE SEMA CASE

We may contrast the Ao experience with Christianity with that of their neighbors to the south, the Semas. Although they occupied an area remote from the mission stations at Kohima or Impur (fig. 1) and experienced virtually no direct missionary influence, the Sema Nagas converted to Christianity at an astonishingly rapid rate. J. H. Hutton, who compiled an important monograph on them, recalled that in the period 1915–20 there was only one small Christian village and a few scattered Christian households in villages along the roads leading into the Sema country.⁶² In the mid-1920s, however, a missionary from Impur, J. R. Bailey, toured the region and found many Christian groups

⁶⁰ Bengt I. Anderson, "On Tour in the Naga Hills," MS, 1931, p. 3, in Papers of B. I. Anderson, Bethel Theological Seminary Library, St. Paul, Minn. (hereafter cited as Anderson Papers).

⁶¹ Tanquist Papers, MS, 1944, pp. 328–29.

⁶² John H. Hutton, *The Sema Nagas* (1921; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1968), preface to 2nd ed.

with their own meeting houses, holding regular services without visible leadership. This appeared so strange to him that he refrained from baptizing the converts or organizing them in a more regular way for fear that he might interfere with this seemingly spontaneous movement. In 1936 the senior missionary on the other side of the Sema country, J. E. Tanquist of Kohima, toured the same territory and reported seeing "marvels of spiritual transformation the likes of which I have never seen before": villages where around sixty households were Christian, who had been worshipping for three or four years without leadership and without ever having seen communion conducted.⁶³ From about this time Sema-speaking boys educated in either the Impur or the Kohima training schools were sent as teacher-pastors back into the Sema country, where they organized Christian communities into churches. By 1938 every Sema village to which such teachers had been sent was entirely Christian.⁶⁴ How did this happen?

A political explanation appears readily at hand. Unlike the Aos' system of village councils composed of elders representing various clans, Sema villages were generally ruled by a single autocratic chief who belonged to a ruling lineage that extended throughout the Sema country. These powerful chiefs directed the villages in war, decided all matters of relations with other villages, and determined what lands the village would cultivate.⁶⁵ In return for land, wives, and food when necessary, a chief's subject-dependents—whom Hutton called "serfs"—gave him obeisance, regular labor in his personal fields, the leg of any sacrificed animal, and help in war.⁶⁶ Owing in part to the dynamics of their political system, the Semas were perhaps the most migratory of all Naga groups. For although they followed a general principle of primogeniture, sons and brothers of a former chief also had claims on the latter's lands and labor. To prevent such men from pressing their claims, a Sema chief had constantly to transfer retainers to his kin, who would then move away and colonize new villages or conquer old ones, themselves becoming chiefs in the process. As Hutton noted, "The authority of a Sema chief is quickly sapped when he can no longer shed off his brothers and sons to found new villages with retainers of their own. In such circumstances he ceases in a generation

⁶³ Tanquist Papers, MS, 1936, pp. 240–41.

⁶⁴ Bengt I. Anderson, "Annual Report for the Year 1938, Impur," MS, Anderson Papers.

⁶⁵ Hutton, *Sema Nagas*, p. 150.

⁶⁶ John H. Hutton, "The Mixed Culture of the Naga Tribes," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 95 (1965): 33.

to be socially distinct from others of his family, and a decline in his political authority follows as a matter of course."⁶⁷

The advent of colonial ideology in the Naga Hills, and in particular the British prohibition of warfare in lands they administered, naturally hampered the Sema chiefs' ability to expand as they had formerly done.⁶⁸ By the 1930s colonial officials were suggesting that the rapid conversion movement of that time was at bottom political, since dependent clients seeking to break away from allegiance to their weakened chiefs did so by breaking with their chiefs' religious ideology.⁶⁹ This may be true, for we do hear of village chiefs in some cases driving Christians out of their villages and into the forest where they formed small groups living on roots and leaves.⁷⁰ But it is also true that many Sema chiefs, unable to shed their kin from the village and becoming increasingly politically isolated, opted to convert to Christianity and even to take the lead in conversion movements among their clients.⁷¹ Thus the Semas' political system, stressed by the advent of British rule, drove both chiefs and their villager-dependents to conversion, though for different reasons.

Yet there was also a religious dimension to Sema conversions. Because of their migratory habits, the Semas had for long incorporated into their own religious cosmology the deities of those whom they conquered.⁷² More important, the Semas, more clearly and with greater

⁶⁷ Hutton, "The Mixed Culture of the Naga Tribes," p. 23.

⁶⁸ The 1891 census reported the Semas' occupation of the large Tizu Valley "within the last thirty or forty years" and noted the severe pressure they had recently put on the southern Ao country. Census of India, 1891, Assam, 1:246. As Hutton observed, "the process of expelling Ao villages went on right down to the annexation of the country by government [in 1906 and 1921], which alone saved the Aos from being driven north and west of Mokokchung" (Hutton, *Sema Nagas*, p. 17).

⁶⁹ Tanquist Papers, MS, 1936, p. 240.

⁷⁰ American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, *116th Annual Report* (Boston: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1930), p. 120.

⁷¹ In 1931 the American missionary Bengt Anderson visited a large Sema village of 300 houses whose powerful chief was a well-known opponent of Christian teachings. Anderson describes meeting the old chief, who reminisced about the old days when his village had been strong and his people headhunters. He complained that the government and mission had broken up their old customs and that converted villagers refused to drink, participate in the old war dances, or pay proper respect to their chief. But to Anderson's surprise, the interview ended with the old man requesting a Christian teacher for his village. It seems that the chief's younger brother had been baptized a year earlier and was now the leader of a large section of the village's retainer population. Unable to shed his brother from the village and thereby monopolize the village's dependent families for his own service, the old chief was forced to give in (Anderson, "On Tour in the Naga Hills," 1931, p. 3). In 1939 Anderson recalled that while ten years earlier Sema chiefs had shown extreme hostility to the mission, "they have now become converted and most of them are very loyal and a good many of them spiritual leaders as well" (Anderson, "On Tour in the Naga Hills," 1939, p. 2).

⁷² Hutton, *Sema Nagas*, preface to 2nd ed.

elaboration than other Naga communities, affirmed the existence of a single overarching supreme god, Alhou. This conforms to Horton's intellectualist theory, which predicts that a community's wider social experience—which in the Semas' case was a function of a more migratory life—would dispose that community to pay greater attention to their high god. "Omniscience and omnipotence are vaguely ascribed to Him [i.e., Alhou]," noted Hutton in 1921, "and though He is remote and inaccessible, He seems to be all-good as well as almighty and all-knowing. . . . Alhou is the supreme dispenser of good and evil, and it is He who makes men rich or poor."⁷³ Elsewhere Hutton wrote that the Semas did not locate Alhou in any particular quarter of the cosmos—an anthropomorphic conception characteristic of most Naga deities—but rather in all space between heaven and earth. "And," he continued, "I have heard a Sema attribute to Him the quality of omnipresence, even if not of absolute infinity, though the Sema in question was not educated or even semi-christianized."⁷⁴ In Sema folklore, human fortune was even understood as lying within the "will of Alhou."⁷⁵ This sharply defined understanding of a high god thus contrasts dramatically with the experience of other, less migratory Naga communities.

Here again, the translators' strategies proved crucial. The Gospel of Mark was first translated into Sema by Tanquist and his native assistants in 1928, followed in the next decade by the rest of Scripture and a steady stream of hymn books. In all of this the Christian God was not, as in the Ao case, translated by the generic word for "spirit," but rather was simply identified with Alhou.⁷⁶ This translation strategy seems to have greatly facilitated the cognitive transfer from the old to the new; perhaps more accurately, it involved no real transfer at all, but only a refinement and elaboration of a thoroughly indigenous conception. Especially significant is that even before the arrival of Christian missionaries, the Semas had already been paying increasing attention to Alhou, their high god. In this way Christianity, by identifying its God with Alhou, rode the coattails of an indigenous movement that, well before the advent of colonial rule, had acquired its own logic and its own momentum.

⁷³ Hutton, *Sema Nagas*, p. 194.

⁷⁴ Hutton, *Sema Nagas*, p. 191n.

⁷⁵ Hutton, *Sema Nagas*, p. 194.

⁷⁶ As in Matthew 5:34 ("Do not swear at all, either by heaven, since that is God's throne . . .") or 22:21 ("Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar—and to God what belongs to God"). *Sümi Bible Kaku Akitheu: The New Testament (Sema Naga)* (Calcutta: Bible Society of India and Ceylon, 1950). See also *Alhou Kishe Le: Gospel Songs in Sema Naga* (Impur: American Baptist Mission, 1941).

THE ANGAMI CASE

Like the Aos, Angami Nagas were heavily exposed to both colonial rule and missionary proselytization from the dawn of Western influence in the region. In 1878 the Baptists planted their first mission headquarters in the very heart of Angami country, at Kohima, which was also the political headquarters of the Naga Hills District. Like both the Aos and the Semas, the Angamis were swiftly integrated into the wider world of British India, while their language was reduced to script by foreign missionaries, who produced their first written literature. Yet the rate of Angami conversions, whether traced by census or by baptismal data, was markedly slower than that of the Aos or Semas. As late as 1971, after nearly a century of intense missionary proselytization, only 12% of the Angami population appeared in baptismal records, and only 40% identified themselves as Christians in census returns. Why this different outcome?

First, the Angamis, alone among the Nagas, did not practice shifting (slash-and-burn) agriculture, but rather built elaborate systems of terracing and irrigation by which steep hills were transformed into flooded rice fields. Tied thus to the land, the Angamis were the least migratory of all Nagas,⁷⁷ a fact that carried several religious implications. For one, the chief Angami deities relating to agriculture—Ukepenopfu, the supreme being, and Maweno, the deity of fruitfulness—were both female, as is typical among the more sedentary, agrarian societies of South Asia. For another, Angami religion, more than those of less sedentary Nagas, was characterized by a close fit between the land and the fertility cult. Since agrarian societies with such religious systems are notoriously slow in assimilating neighboring deities,⁷⁸ the Angamis' ecological orientation may well have hindered their reception, or assimilation, of a Christian identity.

Second, the missionaries' translation strategy seems to have retarded the assimilation of Christian terminology, and hence Christian ideas, among the Angamis, just as it hastened such assimilation among Aos and Semas. While Tsungrem represented an inflation of the Aos' generic term for "spirit" into an all-embracing supreme god, and Alhou

⁷⁷ It also endeared them to British administrators who, arriving with their experience in the Indian plains, had come to admire what they saw as the virtues of a fixed—and hence docile and taxable—peasantry.

⁷⁸ In early Christian history, for example, the word *pagan* (one who did not adopt the new religion) originally meant "agrarian society" or "country-dweller," pointing to the tendency of sedentary, agrarian societies to resist religious innovation, at least relative to more mobile communities or classes.

represented an existing supreme god whose power became enhanced through identification with the biblical deity, the translation of scriptural names into Angami proved far less successful. In his 1890 translation of Matthew, followed soon by John and Acts, Stanley Rivenburg used the foreign term *Jehovah* not only for the supreme deity of the New Testament but also for the generic term *god*.⁷⁹ Two years later, having spent five years in Kohima without having made a single Angami convert, Rivenburg returned to the United States, broken in health and utterly discouraged. As late as 1906, after twenty-six years of proselytization by several American missionaries, only thirty-five baptized Angami converts appeared in mission records.⁸⁰

In 1918 the fourth missionary sent to Kohima, Reverend Tanquist, supervised an entire retranslation of Scripture, this time replacing *Jehovah* with the name of the Angami supreme goddess and ancestress of the human race, Ukepenopfu.⁸¹ At the time Tanquist did not realize that *pfu* was a grammatically feminine ending; nor was he aware that in Angami folklore Ukepenopfu's husband had wandered off to the Indian plains, which explains why a "father-figure" was absent from the Angami cosmology. Tanquist later recalled that in 1922 both he and Rivenburg had come to realize that Ukepenopfu, "which could have the meaning 'the female who gave us birth,' or 'She who is near us,' signified a goddess at the least, and however manipulated and explained (e.g., they would in the course of time come to regard the name as masculine) all sorts of linguistic and theological difficulties would be encountered both in the New Testament and the Old."⁸² Accordingly, even though Hutton had noticed in 1921 that Ukepenopfu in the Angami mind was "apparently at present undergoing a process of change from female to male,"⁸³ the Americans now decided to abandon Ukepenopfu and reinstate *Jehovah* as the proper translation of the Christian supreme being.⁸⁴ But the strategy of identifying the Christian high god first with a foreign term, then with a fertility goddess, and finally with a foreign term again appears to have worked

⁷⁹ Acts 14:11, then, instead of reading, "These people are gods who have come down to us disguised as men," would have read "These people are Jehovahs who have come down . . ." Tanquist to Merrill, 8 March 1960. See also S. W. Rivenburg, *Hymns in Angami Naga* (Kohima: Baptist Mission Press, 1892).

⁸⁰ Philip, *Growth of the Baptist Churches*, p. 84.

⁸¹ Joseph E. Tanquist, ed., *A New Selection of Hymns in Angami Naga* (Kohima: Baptist Mission Press, 1918).

⁸² Tanquist to Merrill, 8 March 1960.

⁸³ Hutton, *Angami Nagas*, p. 181n.

⁸⁴ See *The Gospels, Acts, Romans, and Corinthians in Angami*, 3rd ed. (Kohima: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1923).

against the easy assimilation of Christian ideas into the Angami religious system. To make matters worse, the generic term for “spirit” (*terhoma*), whose equivalent in the Ao language had been capitalized and elevated to stand for God, in the Angami was demoted to stand for “Satan.” As Hutton observed, the missionaries “teach the Angami convert to regard all *terhoma* as evil.”⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Angami religious categories, like Ao and Sema categories, ultimately prevailed. In 1983 Christian Angamis, still a minority among the Angami population, persisted in identifying the Christian high god with their own, traditional supreme goddess.⁸⁶

CONCLUSION

Table 4 summarizes the comparative data presented here with reference to significant correlates of religious change, highlighting similarities and differences between the three Naga communities. Several uniformities emerge among the three groups: all were conquered by an outside power that (indirectly) patronized the new, Christian religion (no. 1); all were integrated into a broader economic and political order as a result of colonial rule (no. 2); and all had been preliterate before contact with British imperialists or American missionaries (no. 3).

From this point on, we encounter significant differences between the three Naga groups, including different rates of conversion, which can be accounted for by Horton’s intellectualist theory. So long as the social experience of the Aos and the Angamis—but not that of the Semas—remained confined to their immediate locale (no. 4), the lesser beings of their cosmology, identified as they were with that locale, retained their capacity to explain, predict, and control the Nagas’ experience of reality. At the same time, these two communities largely ignored their cosmology’s upper tier, the domain of the high god (no. 5). This meant that before colonial institutions had broken down the social isolation of these groups and exposed them to a larger social world—a process that did not really get under way until World War I, accelerating with and beyond World War II—the early missionaries had been elaborating precisely that part of the Ao and Angami religious cosmologies with which villagers had been least concerned. This

⁸⁵ Hutton, *Angami Nagas*, p. 180.

⁸⁶ “Once thought to be far away,” noted an Angami Christian, “Ukepenuopfii is brought nearer through the gospel, [and] man is allowed to talk and have fellowship with God personally” (Linyii, *The Angami Church since 1950*, p. 75).

Table 4. Correlates of Conversion among the Nagas

	Ao	Sema	Angami
1. Conquest of an outside power patronizing a new cult	+	+	+
2. Integration into a broader economic or political order	+	+	+
3. Extent of literacy in the precontact society	-	-	-
4. Degree of sedentarism in the precontact society	+	-	+
5. Degree of attention paid to the precontact high god	-	+	-
6. Degree of perceived break with the precontact cosmology	-	-	+
7. Degree of proselytization on behalf of the new cult	+	-	+

would explain the Christian movement's slow start among those groups. As the twentieth century progressed, however, increasing integration of the hill region with British India confronted all Nagas with a far larger reality than their local spirits could be seen as controlling. Accordingly, they began paying greater attention to the high god who, as sovereign of the entire universe, was seen as more clearly in charge. It was at this point that the missionaries' earlier labors, concerned as they were with elaborating indigenous notions of the high god, finally bore fruit in the form of what appeared as conversions to Christianity.

Because the Sema Nagas were more migratory than the other two groups (no. 4) and hence had a greater experience of a larger social universe, they had a more highly developed conception of their indigenous high god than did the other groups (no. 5). Therefore, the decision to identify the Christian God with the Semas' high god helps explain the rapid conversion of this community, despite a lack of extensive Christian proselytization among them. Neither the Aos nor the Semas, then, experienced much difficulty domesticating the Christian God into their own cosmologies (no. 6). In the case of the Aos, the Christian God was identified with the generic term for "spirit" in a system whose own high god was already otiose and largely ignored. In the case of the Semas, the Christian God was identified with an already important high god. The Angamis, however, thanks to the contradictory and dubious translation strategies adopted by mis-

sionaries in the field, could not as readily assimilate the Christian God into their religious system.

Finally, there is no positive correlation between the degree of proselytization and the rate of conversion among the various Naga groups (no. 7). Since the Semas converted to Christianity with little or no direct missionary activity, we can virtually eliminate the degree of exposure to missionary preaching as a significant variable in the conversion process. What mattered, in the last analysis, was the nature of Naga cosmologies and the things that were happening within those cosmologies at the time of contact with outsiders, together with the Nagas' experience of a wider world. If we are to explain religious change in colonial encounters, this, I believe, is where we must focus our attention, not on some notion of a monolithic "colonial discourse."

It must be added that since the Nagas' Christian identity clearly marks them apart from Hindus, Muslims, or other peoples of the Indian plains, that identity has been of great use in their ongoing resistance to political assimilation with the republic of India. This highly charged political context has doubtless helped consolidate a Christian identity among the Nagas since 1947.⁸⁷ But it would be wrong to see that identity as simply a foil for political resistance. The degree to which Christianity has been assimilated into the Nagas' ethnic identity, and even transformed into a genuinely Naga religion, is suggested in the following reflection by an anonymous informant: "Europeans do not have a monopoly on Christianity. When Europeans became Christians they made it a European indigenous religion. Now I, like many Nagas, am a Christian, but I am not a European. Now my God can speak to me through my dreams, just as happened to my Angami ancestors. . . . What I am talking about is Naga Christianity—an indigenous Naga Christianity."⁸⁸

This statement not only reveals the individual's determination to dissociate his own religious identity from that of a former colonial ruler. It also shows his historical consciousness. He is aware that Christianity was at one time as alien to Europeans as it was to his own ancestors and that—through a process that we may call "creative adaptation"—he and his recent ancestors have self-assertively made it an indigenous Naga religion, just as Europeans had earlier "made it a European indigenous religion."

⁸⁷ For a thoughtful review of this issue, see J. J. Ray Burman, "Impact of Christianity among the Tribes of North-East India," in *Tribal Situation in North-East India*, edited by Sarthak Sengupta (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1994), pp. 165–83.

⁸⁸ *The Naga Nation and Its Struggle against Genocide* (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 1986), p. 107.