

Contestation between Religious Beliefs and Customary Practices; Question of Cultural Identity among Zeme Naga Tribe of Assam, India

Chiraibe Kuame

Email address: Chiraik9@gmail.com

Abstract—Zeme Naga is one of the kindred tribes of Zeliangrong and larger Naga group and they are distributed in three different states of North-eastern part of India that is Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. Majority of the Zeme Naga living in Manipur and Nagaland state has converted to different denomination of Christianity. On the other hand, the Zeme Naga living in Assam with the total population of approximately 35,000 has more than half of the total population following the reformed forefathers' religion known as Heraka. Majority of the Christian who are living in Assam are under the Presbyterian denomination. The paper tries to look into the present contestation among the Zeme Naga of Assam between the religious beliefs and customary practices which are in contrary to some religious beliefs and principles of their teaching which subsequently raise the question of authenticity of their cultural identity as Zeme Naga and address how these cultural and customary practices are related to religious beliefs system within the societal context of Zeme Naga who are living in the state of Assam.

Keywords— Religion, culture, customs, identity, Christian, gospel, Heraka, Zeme Naga, Assam.

I. INTRODUCTION

The life style of any indigenous group or tribal society is considered as folk life. All recognized traditional groups possess own distinctive lifestyles governed by certain rules, norms, customs and usage. These are basically established customary practices for the particular society which they carry from their ancestors. The dynamics of the society depends upon such customs and practices. Besides, these are the principles on which their various social institutions develop and function. Customary practices associated with socio-cultural life are the hallmark of a group identity. The context of any customary practices is culture and society. In the context of a traditional society, it is difficult to segregate components of folkways from one another. We should keep in mind that their beliefs, practices, rules, tradition, norms and usages that have been going on from the past are categorized as 'customary law' from ethic perspectives. To cherish such aspiration, it is necessary to understand the unique features of socio-cultural, socio-religious, socio-political and socio-economic life of the Zeme Naga to reconstruct present ethnography pointing out the changing aspects. However, there are certain shift and trend of changes of their usage and norms due to various impinging factors like, modernization, cultural contact, connectivity by certain means and change of religion. Zeme Naga folk life depicts various customary practices that are inter-connected with the entire society.

Cultural identity refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and religion. Cultural identity is constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms and customs.

II. CULTURE AND RELIGION AS ONE'S IDENTITY

Religion and culture always exist in a close relation, together with aesthetics and ethics, religion constitutes culture. (Boyer 2001:214, cited in Jaco Beyers, 2017) said "it cannot be denied that religion is a cultural expression". The hierarchical structure of enlightenment arrangements of culture, races and religion needs to be reconsidered. This reconfiguration includes the considerations of how cultures, races and people with different religious affiliations relate to one another. This process may be labelled as reconciliation, but in fact refers to a process of seeking identity. Mulder (1985: 35, cited in Jaco Beyers, 2017) indicates that religion is expressed and clothed in cultural guise; comprehending religion then implies studying human culture. The reciprocal interaction between culture and religion must be recognised. Religion is determined by culture, but religion also influences culture. The fate of religion and culture is, thus, interwoven. According to Vroom (1996:118, cited in Jaco Beyers, 2017) "it is important to note that cultural identity is ideologically motivated. People profess something about their culture to motivate the manifestation of a particular group". This cultural religious identity provides people with a feeling of certainty, order and meaning – a general feeling of belonging and understanding the effort of creating identity requires an understanding of how people perceive the interplay of religion and ethnicity in creating identity. Kilp (2011: 202, cited in Jaco Beyers, 2017) suggest that the primordial theory implies that one belonging to a specific religion can become part of a cultural group and still retain a religious identity. The result, however, may be that one will not be culturally equal to the cultural group into which one enters. We see the same situation with recent immigrants from Syria and Pakistan to Germany. Immigrants are welcome into the German culture although they have a different religious affiliation. But still many Germans do not recognize the immigrants as equal members of society. To be part of the German people one has to subscribe to all that it means to be a German: Language, Clothing, Religion and so on. Their religious connection

continues to be used to identify immigrants. Their primary distinguishing feature continues to be their faith, not the fresh culture they're striving to embrace. Another view said that one can maintain one's cultural identity and still belong to a particular nation sharing another culture. It is then possible to belong to several cultures simultaneously but in the struggle to adapt and take refuge in a different culture, conflict might arise. geertz (1973: 12, cited in Jaco Beyers, 2017) argue as one is only accepted when one knows, believes and acts in a familiar way to community. According to Matt waggoner (2011: 219, cited in Jaco Beyers, 2017) "religion has indeed relocated. The shift has taken place that religion no longer resides in the consciousness but within culture or a social system". Culture is concerned with the evolution of humans and their beliefs and practices. To understand the culture of Zeme Naga, understanding of the religion which is being followed considering the customary practices of the Zeme Naga community in present time is necessary as both are interwoven.

III. SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE DETERMINES AND DEFINES ZEME NAGA CUSTOMS

The socio-cultural life of any group of people is a hallmark of ethnic identity; it varies from one group to another. Zeme Naga society has various socio-cultural aspects embedded in folkways and norms of the community. Besides, the important aspects of socio-cultural life can be traced through unique food and drink, dress and ornaments and celebration of unique festivals. At the age of globalization and modernization, it is difficult to trace out ethnic identity in multi-cultural settings limiting the opportunity to differentiate caste population and ethnic population by the appearance as descendants of Indomongoloid origin. Every community has their own preference of food and drink. Like other groups, rice is the staple food of the Zeme Naga and rice beer is part and parcel of their community life. Rice beer plays an important role in socio-cultural life of Zeme Naga. There are two varieties of rice beer used by different age groups: Ndui Jou/Zao and Tekui Jou/Zao or Kela Jou/Zao. It is also commonly known as Hejou. They generally use an item as fermenting agent known as nduihi made of rice powder and sugarcane leaf's or Nduihiria (herb). The Heraka followers use or consume them on regular basis especially during the major festivals and events like Helei Ngi, Nchang Ngi, Puakpet Ngi, Nsim Ngi and Hega Ngi and other big events. Hega Ngi is regarded as the biggest festival among the Zeme Naga. Every festival among the Zeme Naga is lunar based and celebrate according to agricultural cycle, as the main occupation of Zeme Naga is agriculture which are basically related to the unique culture of Zeme Naga. Naga, Zeme Rice beer has been abandoned by Christian believers since it violates both the Bible's instructions and Christian principles. Guest is also entertained with rice beer (Tekui Jou/Zao) by the Heraka follower which is totally abandoned by Christian followers. Arkotong Longkumer in his book '*The Poetry of Resistance- The Heraka Movement of Northeast India*' stated "Heraka and Paupaise see the use of Zao as an important part of their tradition" and further added "Heraka have gone to the extent of justifying its (Zao) use by using the

popular slogan 'loss of culture is loss of identity' and the Heraka state this slogan in a drunken stupor" (Arkotong Longkumer 2016:129) which is totally misguided, misinformed and misinterpreted that can mislead the readers far and wide that will result in misconception about the Zeme Naga culture and tradition. It is true that Heraka and Paupaise use Zao as an important part of Zeme Naga culture and tradition but the statement "the Heraka state the slogan 'loss of culture is loss of identity' in a drunken stupor" is completely misquoted and misused from the actual quotation of Rani Gaidinliu "loss of religion is loss of culture and loss of culture is loss of identity". One wonders how an international scholar like him could allow such loopholes in his research work even after doing an extensive field work about his subject matter i.e. Heraka or maybe he intent to defame the culture and identity of Zeme Naga community, reason best known to him.

The concept of Hangseukia and Leuseuki (Morung/Dormitory) for both male and female respectively in every Zeme Naga village is an important part of Zeme Naga culture and customs. Hangseukia (male morung) and Leuseuki (female morung) plays an important role in almost all the important occasion of Zeme Naga. It can be rightly said as the designated cultural learning centre for boys to learn new things from Hangseukia (male morung), and for girls from Leuseuki (female morung) which is the reason why Hangseukia/Leuseuki is called a social gathering place. Undoubtedly there is influence of modernity at this age of globalization due to changing context brought by modernization, cultural contact and technological innovations. It is visible to changing economic practices, dress-styles, embracing modern consumer goods, sophisticated material items. However, it is still visible that the Zeme Naga still adheres to traditional life styles and all these cultural practices provide Zeme Naga a distinct identity from other community. The Customary practices of Zeme Naga which have been following since time immemorial becomes an integral part of their culture and identity which subsequently becomes the customary law of present time. Some of the customary practices which are an integral part of their culture and distinguish Zeme Naga living in the state of Assam of their unique identity are elaborated below in brief

i. Customary practice on birth and Death

The Zeme Naga believes that every living being and human being is created by Tingwang (God) and every child is the son and daughter of Tingwang (God). Whenever the child is born, the name is given and the elders of the family take the child outside the house to show the first light and seek the blessings of Tingwang. If the child is born during the broad day light, the child can be taken out of the house on that day itself to saw the first light but if the child is born after the sunset, the child has to be taken out in the morning of the next day, this ritual is called Kebapupatpe. After five days, a ritual called Henapei henau is performed for the child longevity. On the early morning of that day either Tingku pau (village Priest) or elder from the family has to perform a prayer in the name of Tingwang for the child longevity. After which the child hair is shaved and pierced the ear. As practiced, on the day when the

child is born the name is given. However, the child can be given different name on the ritual day too. Henapei henau ritual is considered as the most important day for the child as on this day all the beliefs and practices of Zeme Naga are bestowed on the child and all the family members have to observe the day reverently in the name of Tingwang. The reason for performing Henapei henau ritual on the fifth day after the child is born is because the Zeme Naga believes that Tingwang has given a chant to the Zeme Naga people to follow whenever a child is born, i.e. Ring, Chai, Ring, Chai, Ring (Life, Death, Life, Death, Life). The last word signifies that the child is alive.

In Zeme Naga custom irrespective of religion one follows, a dead body is buried and does not cremate. The grave is called Herau and the burial is called Bhaibe. The Zeme Naga believe that Death is the third stage of human life therefore people pay highest respect to the departed soul on that day. However, if a woman died while giving birth, the Heraka followers perform the burial ritual by singing Keriu Diliu Kesailiu. Generally, the Heraka followers perform the burial by singing Ndi Bangthu and finally they chant Din Kiu Ming and after the burial of the death body, no one is allowed to mourn over the grave.

ii. Customary practice on Land holding

The Zeme Naga have a different land holding system which follow Clan land holding system and they have common land, clan land and individual land which are interpreted through customary law. Common land is such land where many Clans have their share. Everyone can cultivate on common land which is owned by another clan. However, they are required to pay the landowner "Heram mpua" (land tax) in the form of cash or products from the property. The one who own the land gets a Heram mpua (land tax) from the villagers who cultivate on that land and this tax is given only for the cultivated year. Heram mpua is categorize according to the production of goods from the Jhum field, the family who produce more pays more and the family who produce lees pays according to his/her capacity depending on their produce in terms of Mpuarak (basket), Rehi/Ntui and Hedun (small basket) and sometimes they even measure with Kebuik (mithun Horn). The amount or quantity of goods which is given to the land owner depends on the goodwill of the cultivators. If any land disputes arise, the village elders come together and decide according to the oral history of forefathers ('Peirei' or Clan history) along with the witness and through the interpretation of customary law. Majority of the Zeme Naga living in North Cachar Hills practices Jhum cultivation and every year they clear one forest area where all the villagers cultivate according to their capacity. They cultivate the same land again after a gap of 15 to 16 years.

Whenever there is land conflict it is resolved by the village elders' along with Hepumme [people from other clan who does not have a share on that land]. The conflicting parties usually swear a solemn oath called 'Kadesseube' in the name of God (kedei kedi be nai ting kehube). There are many types of Kadeseube; everyone has their own way of Kadeseube but swearing with egg is the most common one which is lighter

and 'Milui Mihai Mihik ga ra Kadeseube' is the worst form of 'Kadeseube' where the false Person and his family is cursed (Peddai gaibe) to death and they fixed certain months and even years to see the result in the name of God (Kedei Kedi be nai Ting Kehube). In fact, 'Kadeseube' is considered as the last stage to prove oneself either right or wrong. This type of case usually happens among the kit and kin's and between two villages. In Zeme Naga customary law, whenever there is a discussion to settle the land conflict, the village elders and the people from the other clan i.e. Hepumme negotiate and settled the disputes by bringing both the parties at the saddle point.

iii. Customary practice on Marriage

Marriage between the same clan is strictly prohibited among the Zeme Naga. It is to be noted that male and female of the same sub-clan also cannot enter into marriage and if anyone maintains a brotherly relation with the person from neighboring villages, that person and the members from that family too cannot enter into marriage as he is regarded as the blood brother of that family. Maintaining such brotherly relation is called 'wangkai/migia' in Zeme Naga dialect. The Zeme Naga community practices matrimonial system of monogamy even today and condemn exogamous system of marriage. Marriage is the union of male and female to live as a family with religious and social sanction in which the spouses, their parents and elders have to give consent. As belief since time immemorial birth is the first stage, marriage is the second stage and death is the last stage of human life for the Zeme Naga. According to the practices and customary law of Zeme Naga, the bride should follow-up the groom clan and lives in her husband home. They are not in favor of exogamous form of marriage and the male cannot marry a girl of his own clan. There are three forms of marriage among the Zeme Naga viz. Arrange Marriage (Henau Rangbe/Henau Kanneube), Elopement or Love Marriage (Suipak/Puipak) and Widow/Widower Re-marriage (Hangting Nauku). Apart from these, there is a marriage based on chastity of a woman known as 'Pumsang Gei Pungmeibe'. The female group of the bride's relative's charges extra money while negotiating the price of the bride's called pumsang geimi for the chastity of their bride. A woman who has a diligent or decent character, having no evil sense of adultery attains pumsang gei pungmeibe. This pattern of virtuous marriage is highly respected in the Zeme Naga society. The bride price given to the parent in this form of marriage is not used by the parent of the bride; instead, it is distributed to the elders of the brides' relatives for helping and to maintain good relation with the bride after her marriage.

iv. Customary law on Divorce

Whenever divorce take place between husband and wife the responsibility of looking after the children totally comes under the man/husband unless he gives a permission to take their children along with her. Sometimes divorce do take place when a wife is still pregnant, in such case, the husband and his family may ask his wife to return the child to him and his family after the delivery or they may allow his wife to keep the child after the delivery. But even if the wife keeps the child with her, their child (whether male/female) will still trace the name of clan from his/her father. When their girl

child is married, she will be married off by her father's clan name. Even if she gets remarried with another man of different clan, the child from her first husband will still take the title of first husband. If the second husband and his family do not have any problem in taking her child from the first husband along with her in her second marriage then she is allowed to take along with her and if the child from her first husband is a woman, she will be married off by tracing her origin from her first father even if she stays in her second father Home. There are many ways of divorce, if the wife has an affair with another man but refused to admit it, divorce is mostly settled within the family of both husband and wife and the husband family has every right to give the final say on this case and if the husband is guilty, 'Timtha lakpe' (sharing of property) is applied and the properties are shared equally between husband and wife after the divorce except the landed property. In most of the cases, if there is misunderstanding between husband and wife, the elders try to bring both the husband and wife into common understanding but if they can't be brought into common understanding, divorce does take place. Husband divorcing his wife is called 'Tatuabe' in Zeme Naga and the wife forsaking and divorcing her husband is called 'Meube'.

v. Customary Law on molestation, rape and Murder

Attempt to rape or molest a woman is called 'Kereu mi jiambe' in Zeme Naga dialect, such man is expelled from village and even his family usually go out of village along with him. In Zeme Naga customary practices, the husband of that molested or raped woman cannot divorce his wife for that reason as it could be because of Jealousy and others towards husband or wife and his wife has no false on her part, in Zeme Naga it is called 'Henau kheube'. If someone killed another person whether by mistake or by purpose, he/she has to give fine for the deceased family, the Zeme Naga called it 'Peki pumchum or Pegah' and if the person is from the same village, he/she is expelled from the village too, even if it is by mistake. Here only the person responsible for killing is expelled, but because of their shame even his parents and family usually go out of the village along with him to accompany him. There are no fixed years but in Zeme Naga custom, if he/she likes to come back they can do so after 3 years. However, in most of the cases, they do not return back and since the case is related to murder, they need to go far away beyond the reach of the village; the Zeme Naga called it 'Mbeu nke limra'. Going away from the village or being expelled from the village is called 'Hethi thibe' in Zeme Naga and according to customs the villagers even provide food, cloths, spear etc to such person and his family before they leaved. Thus, we can say this type of case is mostly settled by expelling such person from the village itself.

vi. Customary practice in establishing new village

The Zeme Naga follows certain customary practices and rituals in establishing a new village. Any group that wishes to establish a new village have to take prior permission from 'Kedei Mpou Me' (land owner). There are certain customs associated with the entry to the domain of new village also referred as 'Kelo Gutpe Hingde'. Earlier the Zeme Naga followed different ways of establishing a new village such as

'Hingkap sumbe se', 'Keloritpe se', 'Kerebibah bese', 'Heratu rigut pese' and 'Megaukam gutpe kelo'. However, these practices are abandoned after the religious reformation which took place through Heraka movement. According to Heraka, to establish a new village first of all the elders find out the area that is suitable for establishing the village. They select such place where all the basic facilities like water availability, good communication and suitable environment for human habitation and cultivation etc are fulfilled. Before clearing the area people sing the holy hymn 'Ndi gepau nneu lau nnaiye-elung hang ndi thanye:mansai yinneuye'. After singing this holy hymn, people pray to almighty Tingwang (supreme God) for his blessing after which the selected area is cleared. Before entering into new village every family construct a temporary house called 'Nseki' and stays there, they collect water and firewood in advance to be use on the day of entering the new village. The 'Hejuadekung' (holy altar stone) and 'Nchingkang' (shot put) are arranged one day ahead of the entry to new village. In every individual new house, a new 'Nchakang' (holy hearth stone) is installed and household items are kept outside until the ritual is over. On the day of entering the new village, villagers gather outside the new village at Kelopei and enter into new village singing the prayer song 'Ndi phungkum wangra simang' in praise of almighty Tingwang (supreme God) for showering his blessings, marching towards the holy place where 'Hejuadekung' (holy altar stone) is to be installed. The priest then prays to Tingwang (supreme God) for the peace, prosperity and rich harvest, fertility of people and livestock, etc. The priest installs 'Hejuadekung' on behalf of whole villagers followed by devotional song 'Ndinamkhau' three times. After the installation of 'Hejuadekung', a new fire called 'Heteine Mi' is burnt with 'Megang and Meleuria' (fire stick and bamboo string). After which the priest invites all the villagers to collect the fire and go to their respective houses along with household materials. The villagers are forbidden to go out of village and do any work on that day as they strictly observe the day reverently according to beliefs and rituals. They enjoy the whole day in singing and dancing at the compound of 'Paiki' (prayer house). After sunset, the priest offer prayer followed by singing prayer songs 'Raguang Damtuang' and chant mantra of 'Dinkiu Ming' three times.

IV. ENTRY OF CHURCHES AND GOSPEL AMONG ZEME NAGA OF ASSAM

Since 1841 the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries began their works in khasi hills through Rev. Thomas Jones. The welsh Presbyterian missions was a torch bearer for spreading the gospel in North Cachar Hills and among the Zeme Naga of Assam in particular which began working at Haflong back in 1905. Rev. Gerlan Williams has prepared the Zeme Naga to be more receptive and accommodative to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. After Gerlan Williams left Haflong, J.M. Harris Rees arrived at haflong in 1912 and the same year he visited melangpeuram village and opened a mission school at the village and entrusted Haite to be the evangelist to Zeme Naga, who is known to be the first evangelist to Zeme Naga in a sense that through his preaching the first Zeme Naga convert

to Christianity occurred. Haite was a layman from the Presbyterian church of Thuruk Kuathir, a Biate village in Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya. The Biate with gratitude urged the Zeme Naga to study and become Christian. J.M. Harris Rees translated the gospel of Mark into Zeme Naga from the bible with the help of Sumlala Biate and Dituing Pame which was published in the year 1928. Rev. Mireilungbe, also from Melangpeuram village was trained at Cherra Theological College, Aizawl who was ordained in 1946 and regarded as the first ordained ministers among the Zeme Naga. Late Dituing Pame from Melangpeuram village is considered to be the first person who embraced Christianity among the Zeme Naga. He is the son of Late Inngimbe Pame born in Nareram village and was well known in his village for his versatile activities. The actual date and year of Dituing's conversion remained however vague, due to an unavailability of written record. One of the views of Zeme Naga Christians put it in 1910 but the Zeme Naga church leaders today began to have doubt on this view and inclined to the year of establishment of school at Nareram by the Biate brethren which was believed to be in 1907 and the same was alluded by the then Presbyterian Church in Northeast India in its Assembly Golden Jubilee Souvenir 1976, and believed that the missionary work among the Zemes Naga was started in 1907. It is therefore in corroboration with Jones statement that, 'Haite had preached at Nareberam for a whole year without any outward sign of success'. This statement supports the assumption that the conversion of Dituing was most reasonable in 1908. However, the assumed year in the Zeme church is 1910. As a result of his conversion, Dituing Pame was driven out from the village and asked not to have any social relation with the rest of his native people. He lived with his family at the outskirts of the village where the school was built. His faith convinced his next kin and they were added to the new faith. As a result, a new village was established called Melangpeuram, which became the first Zeme Naga Christian village.

Dituing Pame converted to Christianity after he recovered from his sickness. During his sickness, his youngest daughter Namreiliakle pame was born and the family had prepared a lot of rice beer for his daughter 'Pei Nnau' (Zeme ritual for longevity of the child) ceremony, which is still an important ritual among the non-Christian Zeme Naga and a part of Zeme Naga culture and customs even to these days, but all those rice beer was cleared from the house. Instead, they prayed and sang Christian gospel hymnal which is alien to Zeme Naga culture. They translated John 3:16 into Zeme Naga dialect from Khasi language and spread out the gospel in Zeme Naga area by this verse. Dituing Pame had a difficult time in the initial phase of conversion. His relatives, friends and Pemakme (wife relatives) were not happy with him. Some of the relatives came to visit him and express their anger and labelled him as the most foolish person in the village which is how the name of the village 'Melangpeuram' was derived. After few months of Dituing's conversion to Christianity, the villagers celebrated 'Hega-Ngi' festival and his villagers put up a branch of tree in his courtyard 'Mbatlim Raunam' in Zeme Naga dialect to mark the difference between Dituing Pame family and the villagers. Right after the completion of

'Hega-Ngi', his elder brother converted to Christianity and after few years some other families also converted to Christianity. Dituing Pame, after becoming the church elder stayed in Mualdam village (Biate village) for few years and then came back to Melangpeuram village. After becoming old, he requested the Assembly meet to be held in Melangpeuram village which was fulfilled. However, he could not witness the Assembly meet as he passed away before the meet on 2nd January, 1949. At present there are few Zeme Naga villages in the state of Assam which follow multiple faiths where both the followers of Heraka (reformed religion) and Christians of different denominations: Baptist, Catholic and Presbyterian inhabit.

V. CONCLUSION

The Zeme Naga Christians with a mere population who follow the teaching of Gospel were under the Biate pastorate for a long period until their own pastorate was formed in 1950. Following the growth and development of the Zeme Naga Christian churches under the Presbyterian mission, the first pastorate was formed in 1950 and Zeme Naga presbytery was formed in 1956. The first Zeme Naga presbytery meeting was held at Melangpeuram Village from February 8th to 10th, in the year 1957. In 1957, the total population strength of Zeme Naga presbytery was only 847 with 12 local churches and 5 preaching stations. Evangelist Kereuchung of Tousem village from Manipur evangelized and baptized Malia of Asalu village and he embraced the gospel in the year 1976 under the Baptist church. Later as the member increase the Baptist church was established in 1979 at Duijung village. Two Don Bosco students' Heinazinbe of Laisong village and Haimuiteung of Asalu village became Christian under the Roman Catholic Church in 1979. Subsequently, the Roman Catholic followers increased and the Roman Catholic Church in Zeme Naga area was established. The churches and the coming of gospel in the Zeme Naga areas of Assam are very interesting to note, the gospel was brought to Zeme by a Biate tribe through Khasi Jaintia hills of Meghalaya and not by Naga and Zeme or Zeliangrong brethren living in the present neighboring state of Manipur and Nagaland. Christianity as a religion, whatever may be the denomination is one of the major religions in North-eastern part of India and the gospel of Christianity and its teaching was accepted by majority of the people living in this region. However, the coming of Christianity and its gospel among the Zeme Naga living in Dima Hasao (erstwhile North Cachar Hills) district of Assam is worth knowing. It is a well-known fact that the newly converted Zeme Naga under different missionaries at the initial part of spreading the gospel in the Zeme Naga areas asked the followers of forefather religion to give up their customary practices which has cultural values like traditional dress, ornaments, traditional songs and dances including traditional institutions like Hangseukia (Male dormitory) and Leuseuki (Female dormitory) and the use of rice beer which are very much an integral part and essence of Zeme Naga cultural and social values in the process of convincing them to convert to Christianity by labelling those practices as evil and diabolic in nature which is somewhat disappointing. It is

important to understand that culture and religion are not distinct but inter-related and cultural practices become religionized in the long run and the religious idea becomes part of the culture which happens among the Zeme Naga living in the state of Assam when the religious reformation took place from forefather practices and beliefs called 'Pau Pai Se' to reformed 'Heraka' under Rani Gaidinliu. The relationship between culture and religion is revealed in the motivation and manifestation of cultural expression, if culture express how human experience and understand the world, religion is a way in which human experience and understand the world. Cultural expression subsequently enriches the religious experience, Culture is a manifestation of human seeking to express and understand what is within them and what this life means, and religion is one crucial way in which humans find this meaning.

REFERENCES

1. Abdullah Rawan, Mariam. (2018). Culture, Religion, and Freedom of Religion or Belief. *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 16:4, pp. 102-115. available: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15570274.2018.1535033>, accessed on 08/06/2022.
2. Beyers, Jaco. (2017). Religion and Culture: Revisiting a close relative. *HTS Theologies studies/ Theological studies* 73(1), a3864. pp. 1-09. Available: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318753968_Religion_and_culture_Revisiting_a_close_relative/link/59939e470f7e9b989537dea5/download, accessed on 09/06/2022.
3. Chen Hsueh-Hua, Vivian. (2014). Cultural Identity. *Centre for Intercultural Dialogue: Key concepts in intercultural dialogue*, p-1. Nayang Technological University: Singapore, Available: <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/key-concept-cultural-identity.pdf> accessed on 08/06/2022.
4. Dr. Das Ranjan Ranga. (2023). The Zeme Nagas of Assam; Ethnography, Culture and Customary Law, pp- 61-81 Guwahati; The Law Research Institute, Eastern Region, Gauhati High Court.
5. Elu Raitu, Nandang N. Haisoyi & Pouheu N. H. (2012). *Zeme Cultural Heritages & Customary Laws*. pp. 25-27. Haflong: Zeme Council North East India.
6. Jeme, Samsadinbe. (2018). 'N.C. Hills (Dima Hasao) ge Zeme lungbe reha'. In *Zeme Students' Union, Souvenir- The 66th Foundation Day cum 33rd Biennial Conference of Zeme Students' Union*. pp. 1-24. Haflong: Zeme Students' Union.
7. Jeme, Allan. (2012). *A handbook on Zeme Naga Customary practices*. pp. 17-18. Haflong: Department of Information Public Relation, Dima Hasao, Assam.
8. Longkumer, Arkotong. (2016). *The Poetry of Resistance- The Heraka Movement of Northeast India*. p.129. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
9. Newme, Ramkuiwangbe. (2015). *Rani Pui Gaidinliu Rasam*. pp. 83-84. Guwahati: Heritage Foundation.
10. Newme, Pautanzan. (1st March, 2009). *Zeliangrong Customary Laws (in English)*. pp. 17-39. Haflong: Zeliangrong Heraka Association.
11. Newme, Pautanzan. (2011). 'Heraka: the primordial religion of Zeliangrong'. in Kamson, Chaoba (eds.). *Socio-Cultural and Spiritual Traditions of Zeliangrongs (Manipur, Nagaland and Assam)*, pp. 23-44. Guwahati: Heritage Foundation.
12. Newme, Paudateing. (2021). *the gospel and its impact on the socio-culture and religious life of the Zeme Nagas in northeast India; a historical perspective*. pp. 25-35. Delhi: Christian world Imprints.
13. Newme, Paungeulungbe. (2018, July). 'Traditional Institutions among the Zeme people of Dima Hasao'. *Quest, theme: Traditional Institutions of Northeast India*, Vol. XII No. 1, pp. 45-57. Guwahati: Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture.
14. Nriame, Nakaulang. (2015). 'Gaidinliu, India and the Nagas'. *The Flame of Fire: Hundred Years Birth Celebration 1915-2015*, pp. 40-43. Guwahati: Zeliangrong Heraka Association, Northeast India.
15. Panme, Inchekambe. (2015). *The Nagas of North Cachar Hills (Assam)*. pp. 5-30. Kohima road, Dimapur: Zeme Pui Baudi (Zeme Mothers' Association).
16. Pamei, Namthiubuiyang. (2001). *The Trail from Makuilongdi: the continuing saga of the Zeliangrong people*. pp. 29-35. Joyousgard, Tamenglong, Manipur: Gironta Charitable Foundation.
17. Zeliangrong Heraka Association. (2017). *Heraka Hegia Hingde*. pp.1-16. Haflong: Zeliangrong Heraka Association, North East India.
18. Zeliangrong Heraka Association. (2007). *Tingwang Hingde (in Zeme)*. pp. 60-73. Haflong: Zeliangrong Heraka Association, Northeast India.
19. Zeme Christian Centenary Celebration Committee, NEI. (2010). *Souvenir, Sampui: "Tewkanringbe Pengeudibe" (The Glorious Salvation)*. Lodi village, Haflong: Zeme Christian Centenary Celebration Committee, NEI.
20. Zeme Presbytery C.H.T Synod. (2016). *60th annual session cum diamond jubilee (1956-2016)*. Haflong: Zeme Presbytery C.H.T Synod.