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## **Converting the Nagas and Kukis: Missionary Representations**

Ningmuanching

This paper is a study of missionary encounter and the coming of Christianity to Manipur, and its influence on the historical development of Naga and Kuki identities. Through a discussion of missionary representations and conversion of the hill population around Manipur valley which constituted a part of the Assam Mission Field of the American Baptist Mission, the paper argues that the missionary representations of the people were distinct from colonial official representations. Rather than classification of people from hills and plain as well as Nagas and Kukis according to one's place in the scale of civilization, differences were represented on the basis of one's propensity towards conversion. It shows that inspite of their instrumental contribution in providing written languages for the Naga and Kuki group of tribes, missionaries were not the only agents here. The allegiance exhibited by converts towards their own spoken dialect equally emphasizes the agency of the hill people in the reshaping of their social world in which the language of a group became the primary basis of identification. Ironically, the mission project to reduce the dominant dialects of the Nagas and Kukis into a written form was to establish linguistic borders between the different tribes.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Conversion, Kukis, Nagas, Identity, Tribes, Dialect, Missionaries, Culture

Much has been written on the history of missions in Manipur and the impact of missionaries on the residents of the region. In the existing studies on Christianity and its impact, the hill people were juxtaposed to the plain people. In such analysis the conventional view was that Christianity reinforced the cultural gap between the plain people and people of the hills (Downs 1983; Dena 2008). Sajal Nag and M. Satish Kumar have looked at missionary enterprise and civilizing mission as a 'cultural form of colonization' in the North-East and they have discussed the difficulties that were associated with civilizing the so called 'savages'. As they argue, religion forms one aspect of culture change that the hills or jungle area underwent (Nag & Kumar 2002).

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My attempt in this paper is to show how Christianization of the hill people is not a smooth transfer from 'heathen' village communities to a homogenous Christian community; it is a highly contested process involving crucial changes and developments.

Monica Juneja, in a thought-provoking essay on mission encounter, critically looks at missionary representations and conversion, and questions the use of concepts such as identity, community and conversion in different cultural spaces. She brings to our attention the need to address the ways in which the concept of identity was 'reconfigured among different social groups in the wake of their encounter with, and conversion to, Christianity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' (Juneja 2006: 1040). Especially relevant for this paper is her proposition that the interaction of missionaries and their native informants shaped the 'self-definitions of converts to Christianity' in which the language and culture of the native informants occupy a 'frame through which a new understanding of the self was formulated' (Ibid). In a recent article on missionary representations of the Oraons of Chotanagpur, Sangeeta Dasgupta has insightfully pointed out the inter-textuality in the writings of missionaries, administrators and ethnographers, and brings to the fore, the hitherto marginalized role of missionaries and their contributions to ethnographic texts which shaped the definition of tribe (Dasgupta 2016). She also shows that the attempt to convert led missionaries to search for a language, myths, traditions and histories of the potential convert. Thus missionary intervention provided 'the cultural coordinates for a distinct 'tribal' identity' (Dasgupta 2016).

Drawing upon these ideas, this paper is an attempt to study the missionary encounter and the coming of Christianity to Manipur, and its influence on the historical development of tribal identities. It deals with missionary representations and conversion of the hill population around Manipur valley which constituted a part of the Assam Mission Field of the American Baptist Mission. It will discuss the changes associated with the coming of Christianity, as well as the active role played by native converts in the spread of Christianity. My argument is that the missionary representations of the people were distinct from colonial official representations. Rather than classification of people from hills and plain as well as Nagas and Kukis according to one's place in the scale of civilization, differences were represented on the basis of one's propensity towards conversion. It has been pointed out that the instrumental contribution of missionaries in providing cultural elements for a distinct tribal identity could never be ignored (Dasgupta 2016). However, missionaries were not the only agents here. The allegiance exhibited by converts towards their own spoken dialect equally emphasizes the agency of the hill people in the reshaping of their social world in which the language of a group becomes the primary basis of identification. Ironically, the mission project to reduce the dominant dialects of the Nagas and Kukis into a written form was to establish linguistic borders between the different tribes. The first section will look at missionary representations of the hill population known as the Nagas and Kukis. The second section will look at the missionary project of bringing literacy within the hills.

### **Writing about 'Tribes'**

In 1894, William Pettigrew, still not sure as to 'what aboriginal tribe in eastern Ben-

gal' (Pettigrew 1986: 35) he should work amongst, joined the Arthington Aborigines Mission to work in Manipur. The state, which had been closed to general missionary work, was a native state administered by the Government of India during the minority of the Meitei Raja. Pettigrew was the only missionary allowed to enter the state.<sup>1</sup> Thus Pettigrew began his work in the valley amongst the 'civilized' and Hinduised plain people.

Religion, beliefs and practices were important issues that constitute missionary descriptions about the people they intend to Christianize (Juneja 2006: 1031). In Manipur, it becomes the central point of distinction that sets apart the plain inhabitants and the hill populace. According to missionary narratives, the inhabitants of the plains being exposed to Aryan invasions from time to time become Hindus. This sets them apart from the hill inhabitants who were immune from such external invasion. As Pettigrew wrote, 'in the days when the Indian branch of the Aryan race was still in its progressive and colonizing stage', the valley overflowed with 'wave after another of invaders'. Then, a process of conversion to Hinduism began and turned the inhabitants of the valley into 'rigid Hindus'. He continues, 'the hill tribes surrounding remain practically untouched by Hinduism; while all the Manipuris in the valley are now Hindus of a most rabid type' (Pettigrew, 1905: 34). The hill people were 'animists' with no caste division unlike the Hindus of the valley (Pettigrew, 1934: 80). Thus, the contrast between the valley and the hills was clearly marked in their religion. Moreover, the Manipuris were 'civilized', possessing their own manuscripts, genealogies and family records in a 'written character of their own'. However, 'all ordinary business matters are either carried on in Bengali or in Manipuri written in the Bengali character' (Pettigrew, 1905: 34-35).

Pettigrew shifted mission work from the valley to the hills as he was compelled by the government to confine his mission activities 'to a hill tribe to the northeast of the valley'. He settled down in a village named Ukhrul and named his mission work 'the mission to the Tangkhul Nagas, as the hill tribe is called' (Pettigrew, 1905: 38). For his headquarter, he selected Ukhrul village, a large and central village surrounded by smaller villages and 'situated on a mountain top 6,400 feet above the sea and in the midst of the villages of this tribe' as he 'made a new home' in this village (*Ibid.*: 38). The mission field which also included other villages around Ukhrul village came to be known as the Ukhrul Field. The names of the other villages were hardly mentioned and were thus lost in obscurity.

From his first impressions of the people within the hills, northeast of the valley of Manipur, the inhabitants of villages in this area of the hills were categorized as 'very aboriginal' living in an isolated place where no roads exist. After a preliminary tour in the northeast part of the hills, Pettigrew wrote, 'I visited the Tangkhul Hill Country ... spending an interesting fortnight amongst *this very aboriginal tribe*. There is a splendid field here for missionary enterprise' (Pettigrew, 1895: 4). He gave a brief description of the new mission field 'amongst the Tangkhul Nagas' within the hills 'by way of introduction'. It was as a place 'reached by an ordinary hill path' with no 'government road' linked to it. 'The population', as Pettigrew wrote, were 'estimated at 25,000. Like the rest of the Nagas in Assam, they are animistic in their worship, very superstitious, and addicted to 'zu' drinking to a great extent' (Pettigrew,

1899: 12).

When Pettigrew began his work, the aboriginal tribe had never been subjected to any contact from outsiders ‘being left very much to their ignorant wills and ways’. Pettigrew stressed in his report later that, ‘no census had ever been taken of this tribe’ (Pettigrew, 1934: 82). Referring to the census for an idea of the size of population living in Manipur, Pettigrew wrote, ‘According to the census of 1901, the Manipuris, who live in the valley, number 181,158; and the Naga people of the surrounding hills, where there are no less than fourteen different tribes, with their own distinctive languages, number 103,307’ (Pettigrew, 1905: 33). In missionary accounts therefore, the hill was the home of a conglomeration of different tribes.

According to his observation, these tribes represented a ‘distinct people with language, customs and habits peculiar to themselves’. The Tangkhul Nagas were identified as the dominant tribe, and found to ‘exceed in numbers all the other fourteen tribes inhabiting Manipur’ (Pettigrew, 1905: 38-39). Pettigrew began his mission work focusing on the Tangkhuls, and his reports soon include details about them. As he wrote:

*The people of this district are by nature in a state of active feud, and when free from foreign interference, they devote all their energies to their quarrels. When their quarrels is of the bitterest nature they kill one another, wherever and however they can, the killing of a woman or a child then being esteemed more than the killing of a man. When passions are not so heated, they confine themselves to certain fixed bounds, and their women and children pass to and fro uninjured. In some cases in the eastern section, government expeditions have obliged to burn villages: this seems to be the only sure preventive of outbreaks (Pettigrew, 1905: 38-39).*

From the detailed description about the Tangkhuls, it was clear that what the missionaries identified as ‘tribe’ by no means represented an organized and united tribal group. The hill people were represented as essentially hostile and living in a ‘state of active feud’, while each tribal group were engaged in internal quarrels. There was segregation of the people into ‘certain fixed bounds’ often engaged in bitter quarrels that usually ended in bloodshed. The missionary’s account laid emphasis on the violent aspect of the nature of interaction. Thus, a prominent aspect of inter-village relationship between these scattered villages was that of conflict, with peaceful interaction confined to ‘women and children’ (*Ibid.*). Their cruelty to women and headhunting practices characterizes them as savages (Ningmuanching, 2010: 52).

The following account about the Tangkhuls further reveals the condition in the hills when the first missionary arrived in Manipur:

The Tangkhul Nagas had hitherto been left very much to their own primitive ways. They had no written language. Not a soul in the whole tribe knew anything of even the rudiments of education. The majority of the people had never left their mountain fastnesses even to visit another tribe or the people of the valley. There was no tribal organisation to link the scattered, stockaded villages that crowned the mountain tops and that were further isolated from one another by differences in dialect. Each village

was ruled by a chief or headman and elders who were open to bribery and corruption, and the Tangkhul Nagas had gained the reputation of being the biggest liars and the biggest cowards among all the 22 tribes in the hills. The first task of the missionary was to win the confidence of these suspicious hillmen, to convince them that he was not a paid government servant who would spirit away their young men to the outside world.<sup>2</sup>

According to the statistics presented in this missionary report, the hill people now comprised of 22 tribes living in 'scattered, stockade villages'. The account shows that each village was under the leadership or authority of a chief, elders or headmen who were prone to 'bribery and corruption'. This implied that the villagers were more often than not oppressed by them. The state of isolation was further intensified by 'differences in dialect'.<sup>3</sup>

The missionary compared the Tangkhuls to the Nagas in the rest of Assam as he wrote, 'They, like some of the Nagas in Assam proper, are headhunters. Whole rows of human skulls are hung up in the chief's house, to show their bravery and success; and many of the warriors wear necklets with human hair attached' (Pettigrew 1905: 38-39). Thus we can see that distinctiveness of the Tangkhuls as a 'tribe' is hard to draw.

Missionary accounts constitute references to the nature of the people. Understood as degraded who need salvation, the Tangkhuls were written as naturally quarrelsome, living in constant feuds as well as worshippers of demons. Their uncivilized lifestyle made them prone to sickness and diseases; 'these degraded and superstitious people have little or no idea of sanitary principles, consequently their bodily ailments are many; and when superstitious rites have failed, we have been permitted through medicine and other means to give relief' (*Ibid.*: 40). Characters that seemed to have stood in the way of conversion or slowed down the process of people 'accepting the truth' are explicit in missionary narratives as they began evangelism. For instance, after years of working amongst the Tangkhuls, Pettigrew likened them to the Manipuris of the valley as he said, 'The missionary found a people anything but truthful or reliable. The Manipuri is reckoned a liar, but these Tangkhul Nagas can beat him. The missionary has not come across one yet whose words or actions can be fully relied upon' (Pettigrew, 1899: 14). Influenced by the bigoted Hindus of the valley after generations of constant contact, the Nagas too were conservative in their beliefs. As the missionary pointed out, 'They have for generations been in constant touch with the Manipuris of the valley, who are bigoted Hindus, and it is a fact that the Nagas also have conservative ideas of their own beliefs in evil spirits' (Pettigrew, 1900: 24). However, what inspired the missionary to work without giving up is that, unlike the Hindus, they were seen as potential converts who acknowledged a Creator God corresponding to Christian beliefs. For Pettigrew, all that the missionary had to do was 'to reveal to them, with God's help, the Creator whom they have forgotten' (*Ibid.*).

In 1908, permission was granted to the American Baptist Mission Society to extend its field of mission activities to areas of the hills which were previously forbidden. The missionary was now allowed to tour in areas within the hills beyond

the northeastern section (Pettigrew, 1910: 66). And in 1912, the Government prodded the missionary to extend his educational work amongst the Kukis.<sup>4</sup> Thus with the permission to extend his educational work amongst whom the state referred to as the Kukis, the gaze of the missionary turned towards the other areas of the hills. This was followed by ‘enquiries’ made about the area and the people. Of the Kukis, Pettigrew (1913: 39) wrote:

These Kukis are the old Kuki clans included in the term Lushai who were originally in Chin land and Lushai land respectively, and have emigrated northwards into Manipur ...this clan numbers about 37000 souls. These old Kuki clans are organized far more democratically than the Lushai or the Thado. There is no regular system of government among the old Kukis, and they have no hereditary chiefs as among the Thado. A headman called the “Ghalum” is appointed by themselves over each village, but is much more a priest than a potentate, and his temporal power is much limited.

Thus, villages with chiefs having ‘lesser temporal power’, who were democratic and priestly, were collectively defined as the old Kukis. These villages of the ‘old Kukis’ were understood to be different from other Kuki villages having a chief in each village with supreme authority (*Ibid.*: 39-40). The difference was thus found not in people as a group but between individual chiefs who differed in their power and authority. Indeed, enquiries made in an attempt to start evangelistic work among the people referred to as Kukis, revealed distinctions, divisions and details of the people named collectively as Nagas and Kukis.

There is no precise location occupied exclusively by a single group. For instance, the Tangkhuls, considered the dominant group with whom the mission were working and in whose midst they were located, were understood to occupy ‘nearly the whole eastern frontier of Manipur State, and a section of the administered territory at the east. They number in this section of the state above 26000 souls’ (Fox, 1913: 42). However, the Tangkhuls were not the only inhabitants of this area. As the missionary wrote, ‘Scattered among them are also about 5000 Kukis (different branches of the Thado clan). These villages, located on the mountain-tops, number about 200’ (*Ibid.*). With the division of the hill areas subsequently into subdivisions, different areas came to be understood as the exclusive place of the dominant group living within the area:

Enquiries made during a tour of investigation in S.W. Manipur elicited the fact, that the western portion of Manipur, north of the Cachar road, is inhabited by these Thado branches of the Kuki clan and the country south of the Cachar road, although having a good many of the Thado clan villages, is to a greater extent occupied by the different branches of the Lushai and old Kuki clans (Pettigrew, 1913: 39).

In addition to dominance in numbers, equally significant in an area where various groups of people coexist was identifying the predominant language. The dominant dialect was considered the ideal medium of preaching the Gospel. It was

often the chosen dialect to be reduced to a written form which was painstaking work. Thus the most common dialect was crucial in order to reach greater number of people through preaching or disseminating the printed word of God. This became an important piece of information that the missionary intended to find out.

Indeed the common dialect spoken in a potential field caught the attention of the missionary during a preliminary tour. From the information he gained from his 'enquiries' made during his tour in the South West Manipur, Pettigrew learnt that the Thado dialect was predominantly used even by a population of about 6000 Kabui Nagas as well as all branches of Kukis and Lushais (*Ibid.*: 39-40). His observation of only one part of the hill areas brings Pettigrew to conclude that Thado is the lingua franca for the Kukis. In addition to the spoken Thado dialect being perceived as the most commonly used, the Thado manners, customs and traditions and form of government were found to be less obstructive to conversion:

The people of this clan are on the whole more open minded and more hospitable, and evidently from information gathered from the Kuki Christians, are more susceptible to the truth than the Naga tribes. They have nothing like the number of sacrificial feasts and carousals that the Nagas have and the fact of the Thadous having a chief in each village with absolute authority is a great advantage, compared to the democratic Nagas, where every Tom, Dick and Harry of the village has his say in matters that come before the village courts (*Ibid.*: 40).

Thus in Pettigrew's opinion, the potential converts amongst the Kukis were the Thados. Although Christian converts were known from other dialect groups such as Anals and Koms by 1913, the mission work was understood to be mainly amongst the Thados. Pettigrew, in his first report from the new headquarter from Kangpokpi called it 'The Thadou Kuki Work'. This work amongst the Thadous, as Pettigrew accounted, commenced in 1912 from Ukhrul mission field followed by a large number of baptisms. Conversion in large numbers amongst the Thado Kukis, whom Pettigrew referred to as 'that interesting tribe of nomads' gave the missionary 'bright hopes' for the success of mission work (Pettigrew, 1921: 66).

A new medical missionary named Dr. G.G. Crozier and his wife joined the pioneer and only missionary towards the end of the Kuki Rebellion in 1919. They were followed by Dr. Werelius, Dr. Tanquist and Earl E. Brock well into the 1940s. In 1919, the mission station was shifted to Kangpokpi, thus opening up the hills initially closed to Christianity. It is from the writings of Mrs. Crozier that we see a representation of the Nagas and Kukis as a whole. Juneja argues that missionary representation of other cultures in their writings contains 'individual details' which were then used as 'representatives' of 'an alien culture in its totality' (Juneja, 2006: 1031). We can observe the same in Mrs. Crozier's very interesting account about the Nagas and Kukis as she points out the distinctions between the Nagas and Kukis. Language diversity characterized the Nagas against the Kukis. As Mrs. Crozier wrote, 'The fact that all Kuki clans are able to communicate in the Thado dialect is of tremendous importance for the missionary. In striking contrast every Naga village of



every Naga tribe is said to have its own dialect often very different from that of a neighbouring village!’ (Crozier, 1922: 2-3). This language difficulty that existed amongst the Tangkhul villages was however visible among some of the Kuki tribes as well. The ‘old Kukis’ are said to have different ‘languages or dialects’ which necessitate the need to use Manipuri as a lingua franca for communication among the villages (Pettigrew, nd.: 126).

The coming of the missionary into the hills was associated with the introduction of literacy among the hitherto illiterate people for whom any old piece of paper was a curiosity (Pettigrew, 1934: 83). What is even more striking is the impartation of Christian truths in a written vernacular, a radical change for people without any written language by the Christian missionaries. Thus, the beginning and spread of literacy and Christian mission work are closely associated. This section will show that such a change associated with mission encounter has far reaching influence in the identity formation in the region. It will look at the mission’s role in teaching language through Mission station schools, how the language problem was tackled, native engagement in village schools, and subsequent development influenced by possession of the printed word in the vernaculars of converts. Evangelical work by Christian converts involved both preaching as well as teaching in village schools. This native involvement in mission work provided opportunities for inter-village interaction and bonding especially through village schools funded by the villagers and taught by native teachers alone. One significant development was the beginning of a new understanding of the self not just through religion or one’s village but language and culture beyond the bounds of a village.

Toiling in the field for years with no converts forthcoming, missionary reports were replete with explanations about their disappointments in the mission field. But disappointments dimmed as the missionary also elaborated on inspiring developments as well. One such development was the preaching of the Gospel to people in their own tongue, which the missionary learned to speak and painstakingly reduced into written form. Unfolding the story of Jesus in a language they could understand captivated the interests of the heathen school boys. The process of conversion explicit in missionary accounts about failures and triumphs as well as expectations was that first the hearing of the Christian message in a language they could understand would be followed by accepting the Christian truth and the subsequent confessions of sins (Pettigrew, 1900a: 24.). However mere teaching seemed inadequate as the missionary was confronted by ‘ignorant’, ‘superstitious’ and conservative hill people indifferent to the Gospel. In missionary sensibility, remoteness to civilization offered a valid reason for such indifference to the Christian message.<sup>5</sup> Confronted by such unresponsiveness, the missionary was however optimistic; Pettigrew expressed his dependence on ‘the power of the Spirit’ which he believed would ‘guide them into the truth, convicting them of sin, and convincing them of a Savior to save and keep’. Having preached the Gospel he asserted that ‘the seed has been sown, and pray God that His Spirit will commence a mighty work in many hearts’ (Pettigrew, 1907: 45). One reason that the quintessential Christian convert should be literate and ready to teach the message of his new found faith to the rest of the heathens is explicit in a

poignant account about an illiterate group of Christians asking for a teacher:

Member of Kacha Naga church on Manipur side ... Their plea was "give us a teacher", they said, "We are Christians, but we do not know anything. We feel like crazy men as we try to help others who are interested in becoming Christians because we do not know how to help them". There are difficulties because they belong to a dialect group whose language is unintelligible to the rest of the Kachas of Manipur where we have some Christians (Alhquist, 1937).

It is clear that a significant and necessary development among the heathens as well as Christian converts that the missionaries intended to bring forth was to teach them how to read and write. There was urgent need for translation as well. The missionary stressed upon the 'importance and great need for the printed Word of God' in the languages of the converts. That mere hearing of the Christian message was not enough for the development of converts into a good Christian manifested when some of the native Christian workers, 'under the influence of great emotions during their conference meetings', were known to have a wrong interpretation of the Christian message. The missionary lamented that there was a tendency on the part of a convert with little or no knowledge of salvation to lead 'some astray in their interpretation or want of same'. Thus the missionary stressed on the 'need for concentration in a very special manner on the work of translation' (Pettigrew, 1923: 93-94).

The spread of literacy was facilitated by the mission station school in the initial years of mission work. In this mission endeavor, communication was a challenging problem, more so in a place where 'there was no written language, with every village having its own dialect and 'not a soul in the whole tribe knew anything of even the rudiments of education' (Pettigrew, 1934: 83). Reducing dialect to written form was the necessary precondition for a successful mission work and dissemination of the Christian gospel to people in a language they could understand. Unlike the valley of Manipur where *Meiteilon* or Meitei language is common, the missionaries encountered a complex linguistic situation in the hills. The missionary chose to start mission work in the north eastern section of the hills based on the assumption that many of the hill population in the north eastern area were familiar with Manipuri (Pettigrew, 1913: 59). However he soon learned that few could speak Manipuri fluently. Realizing the need to preach the word of God in a language they could understand, learning the language spoken in Ukhrul became an important daily work for Pettigrew.<sup>6</sup>

Pettigrew earnestly set about to learn the Ukhrul dialect and soon the first and second primer in the dialect used in Ukhrul village were composed in 1897 and 1898; and by 1899, the school at Ukhrul mission station were taught in what the missionary referred to as 'their own language'.<sup>7</sup> However, the absence of a group speaking a common language soon manifested. The missionary encountered a baffling linguistic situation amongst the hill villages, each having a dialect of their own.<sup>8</sup> The difficulty confronting the pioneer mission work was aggravated by the fact that all villages in the mission area not only 'differ in dialect' but differ to such an extent that they 'have difficulty in understanding each other' (Fox, 1913: 61).

How did missionaries tackle this problem? In an attempt to unify the language,

the missionary chose the dialect used in Ukhrul village, reduced it in written form and it was taught in the school which Pettigrew hoped will make it 'universal for the tribe' (*Ibid.*: 59). In this way, the missionary promoted the Ukhrul dialect to be the language for the people referred to as Tangkhuls. The languages taught at Ukhrul mission station schools now comprise a vernacular language and English (Pettigrew, 1898: 21). Later, Manipuri was added to the school curriculum in the school at Ukhrul.<sup>9</sup> Pettigrew reported that 'a course of study in Naga was taught at the Primary department while the 'more intelligent boys' study Manipuri and English (Fox, 1913: 27). From a spoken dialect, the written Ukhrul dialect came to be referred as the Naga language. The languages taught and studied in Ukhrul mission school included Tangkhul, Manipuri and English. Providing education in the standardized Tangkhul dialect, the first mission school at Ukhrul was deemed the centre of education for the Tangkhuls where students were trained so that they could be evangelists, teachers, and writers for the village schools as well as workers for state services (Fox, 1913: 60).

After Pettigrew paid a visit in the other parts of the hills in 1912, boys from villages in different parts of the hills came to Ukhrul to attend the mission school. Contacts with the people in other parts of the hills paved the way for other groups to become Christians (*Ibid.*: 59). By 1913, the students enrolled at Ukhrul mission school constitutes not just boys from Tangkhuls villages but 'four Thado Kuki boys...besides these there are four others from the three branches of old and new Kuki clans. The two boys of this clan in the school who have become Christians wish to remain in school and learn more before teaching and preaching' (Pettigrew 1913: 40). With the enrollment of the Kuki boys, the need to extend the school curriculum arose.

As a response to the necessity to learn more languages, Pettigrew recognised Thadou as the lingua franca for the Kukis from observations made during a tour. He concluded that if Thado language is reduced to writing, not just the Thado clans but 'the many and varied clans that cover the southern and western hills of Manipur' could be reached (Pettigrew 1913: 39-40). Thus, like Ukhrul dialect for the Tangkhuls, Thado dialect was chosen to be reduced into written form and called the Kuki language. The 'two heathen boys' identified as Koms who attended the mission station school at Ukhrul and become Christians in 1911 were instrumental in helping the missionaries during the preparation of a school primer for the Thadou Kukis. A Thadou Kuki Primer was prepared and printed in 1914 for the Thadou Kuki students in the Ukhrul station school as well as for the Christian Kukis in the Western area of the hills (Pettigrew, 1916: 49).

With the growth of the Christian movement and addition of speakers of new dialects, the mission work now required more than one missionary family (Pettigrew, 1913: 41). Translation work increased for the Kukis as the first medical missionary couple arrived. Thus by the late 1920s, a number of publications in Manipuri, Tangkhul and Thadou languages as the missionary called them, appeared. The Thadou Kuki copies of the Gospel of Luke, John, and the Acts of the Apostles were printed and published in 1926. The Tangkhul Naga *New Testament* was printed and published in 1927 (Pettigrew, 1931a).

The availability of an 'independent language' along with folklore and history for people was significant in giving distinct group identity to them (Dasgupta, 2016). With Pettigrew engaged in translation work for both Manipuri and Tangkhul and Dr. Crozier busy with the Thadou dialect, literature in three written languages became available for the native converts. Pettigrew was glad to report about, 'placing His truth into the hands of the three most important hill tribes of Manipur' (Pettigrew, 1931c).

The mission station school provided an important arena for the coming together of tribes believed to be always at odds with each other. Missionaries were especially enthused by the fact that different tribes mingled without any tension or conflict (Crozier, 1929). Seeing a cordial and peaceful environment of the mission school at Kangpokpi thronged by people from separate villages, the missionary envision the mission station school as a possible melting pot of different groups confined in exclusive villages. However, the lack of a common language and the need for one soon manifested. None of the three written languages could become the lingua franca among the converts. Even among people regarded as a tribe, a single written dialect could not serve as a common language. For example, the Kacha Naga dialect had been reduced to writing and translation of parts of the gospel was completed. Yet some sections of Kacha Nagas could not use them.<sup>10</sup>

Due to such complex linguistic situation, the state authorities were resolute to impose Manipuri language on the hill tribes. They also suggested the use of the Bengali character instead of the Roman character but it was rejected. The suggestion to 'adopt the State curricula of the state Schools in future' was agreed on the condition that 'Bible and religious instruction should be given in each class in each grade' (Pettigrew, 1931b). After the adoption of the state curriculum in village schools and turning them into state schools, students decreased in numbers in these village schools. To encourage the hill students, books in Manipuri were given free of cost to those who would learn Manipuri.<sup>11</sup> With the need to use Manipuri in schools, Christian fellowships and even Sunday schools at the mission station where conferences bring together Christians of diverse dialects, Christian converts irrespective of dialects had to buy Manipur literature for use (Pettigrew, 1931c). However this did not disrupt literary work in other dialects in use within the hills. Translation and literary work in Tangkhul and Thadou continued as the missionary produced 'pages of Thadou Kuki in print' (Crozier, 1930). By the 1930's a number of literatures 'approved by committees of leading Thadou Christians' were translated in Thadou for use among the Kuki converts. In addition to books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and Romans of *The Bible*, translations also include 'pamphlet on narcotics' as well as books on church practice.<sup>12</sup>

Significantly, the missionary always found the state policy expedient for the hill students. They understood that language diversity in a growing Christian community made it impractical to continue with one tribal language as a medium of instruction. However it appeared difficult to successfully implement state policy to promote a common language. The struggle to impose a common language continued till 1947. The missionary agreed to use Manipuri language as a medium of instruction purely

due to practical reasons. As Brock wrote, ‘This will enable the school to serve all groups instead of only those of a single tribal language-about one sixth of the people ... put the teaching in a language needed by all and in a language in which books are available’ (Brock, 1947). By the 1950s, the mission and village schools as the propagator of vernacular languages were taken over by the state in which Manipuri was promoted to be the main language taught to the students. Thus we can see attempts to impose Manipuri as a common language among the hill inhabitants who speak different dialects. Conscious of the practical necessities, the missionary was found not critical about this policy. The missionaries obliged to the Darbar’s proposal that the mission schools at Ukhrul and Kangpokpi be turned into state schools by teaching the same curricula with the rest of the valley schools (Pettigrew, 1931b). The missionary saw the practical side to this change where Manipuri would be the common language. In the same year, Manipuri version of the *New Testament* was published, fragments or sections of which had been printed since 1896.<sup>13</sup>

However, in spite of such a policy being followed, people who use the Manipuri version expressed their want for a hymn book printed in their dialect (Crozier, 1930). The converts’ choice for hymn books was accounted by Pettigrew as he said, ‘the music and words appeal to this Christian community more than any other, and they were quite willing to accept the responsibility of having a larger number of hymns, and a larger edition printed (Pettigrew, 1931c). Of all the literatures in both Tangkhul and Thadou, the native converts seemed to show better appreciation for the hymn books. In addition to the primer, it seems hymn books are the first literature produced for the hill people. Hymns must have been much easier to translate because of their length than the *Bible* or other forms of literature and therefore were appreciated. However it also indicates the reception of the written word by the hill people in their own way.

With the extension of mission work and as more language groups within the hills became Christians who aspired for a printed word in their spoken dialect, the need for literature was felt strongly (Pettigrew, 1930b). The problem of diversity however persisted and manifested in the station schools as well as in conferences held in the mission station. Missionaries who arrived later saw the urgency to introduce a common language to tackle the persistent problem of language diversity in the station school. Their intention was to ‘teach Manipuri language to the pupils as soon as they come to school, so that they will have a common language’ (Werelius, 1936). The attempt to run a central school in Kangpokpi mission station for ‘both Tangkhuls and Kukis through the medium of the Manipuri language, only imperfectly acquired by children from the hill tracts’ went on for years. But problems soon emerged and by 1938, it was reported that the initiative for a centralized school where different tribes could learn through a common language had failed to yield ‘results that warrant its continuance’ (Tanquist, 1938). Deemed to be an important language which all groups needed, Manipuri, the officially promoted language in the state clearly failed to replace the ‘language’ of the students from the different groups within the hills. Thus, we see that the hill populaces come to express attachments to ones’ dialects.

Evangelism through native converts was an important factor in the spread of Christianity. Since the early days of teaching to heathen boys in the Mission station school, the missionary envisaged literate converts as future workers who will dedicate their lives for 'the Lord's service amongst their own people' (Pettigrew, 1900b: 15-16). The missionaries thus referred to same dialectical group as a common group or 'people' thus using language as the basis of group identification.

A number of village schools soon emerged to impart education to the hill villages far from the mission station besides the Mission station school which catered to only limited number of children. These village schools with mission educated native converts as teachers functioned as educational institutions and evangelistic centers in different areas of the hills. As the mission failed to support them due to dearth of funds, most of the schools were supported by the villages who did not want their childrens' school closed (Werelius, 1936).

The function and purpose of the village school in missionary perspective was clearly stated by Pettigrew (1910a: 26) in his field report of 1910 as follows:

They have little opportunity, and practically, no outside stimulus to understand the benefit of even an elementary education ... if three years arrangement ... is sufficient to teach them to read and write in their own dialect ... to know how to read the Gospels, religious and moral books they are taught, it is also a satisfactory arrangement from the point of view of the missionary.

Village schools, although established for evangelizing and nurturing of Christian growth, had its historical implications beyond the religious sphere due to its teaching of the vernacular. It was clear that native converts were instrumental in bringing the gospel into the interiors of the hills as Christianity began making inroads into areas which were closed to the foreign missionaries. These village schools served as an important medium through which the hill people were taught their own dialect. In an account about the village schools in Manipur an interesting arrangement was exhibited by the villages. The pattern of hiring school teachers was as follows:

There are now several villages asking for mission schools but at present there is neither money nor teachers available. The teacher of one Christian village is paid by the church in another village for no village teacher likes to be paid by his own village lest they consider him a slave of the village. Each Christian village helps the work in some other village either educational or evangelistic.<sup>14</sup>

Instead of teaching in his own village, a village teacher preferred to teach in another village to retain his reputation in his village. Thus, village schools served as an important space for new forms of inter-village communication and linkages. This facilitates mobilizing the villages speaking the same dialect to learn how to read and write.

Village evangelists, as they were known, visited villages in the hills; they preached the gospel as well as taught the principles of sanitation. Not confined to one's own village, new converts saw each and every village as a mission field where he

should do mission work. If they were allowed, they would start mission work in their own village. From their home village, native evangelists then marched on to other villages to do the same evangelistic work they had done in their own village. In 1921, Dr. Crozier was able to report about five native evangelists working in what he referred to as the 'Kuki area'. He wrote, 'In the Kuki area there were five men spending more or less of their time in evangelistic work among the villages, besides three village school teachers...most of the converts come directly as the result of the work of the village teachers' (Crozier, 1921). Some of the field evangelists were trained in medicine, and did excellent medical and sanitation work in his home village (*Ibid.*). Native evangelism through village schools also linked one village with another village facilitating inter-village interaction (*Ibid.*).

How did they work amongst people speaking different dialects? The direction of mission expansion, as pointed out by Patrick Harries in the context of Africa, was determined by linguistic association (Harries, 1988: 27). Likewise in Manipur, the missionary and native converts, engaged in evangelism and mission work, found it more expedient to send evangelists in areas where the same spoken dialect of the native evangelist was in use. A Kabui named Maipak, who lived in Imphal, was found to be doing part time evangelism in the Kabui villages in the hills. Thus the home village of the native converts as well as their spoken dialect determined the group of people they could best work with (Crozier, (1921).

However, we need to realize that the native converts' zeal for evangelism was not for a delineated group. It was not consciousness as a tribe but purely practical reasons that decided who should work where. The forming of about two hundred Christians from the people called the 'Kom tribe' was credited to two native converts of Ukhrul School named Teba and Longkhobel.<sup>15</sup> Teba, speaking the Kom dialect was 'placed in charge of the South-east area of the State where the majority of the Kom and Anal Kuki tribes live'.<sup>16</sup> Another dialect group amongst whom Teba worked was the Anals as the two native converts of the same dialect working amongst them had died.<sup>17</sup>

The development of attachment to the dialect of Anal and Kom tells us an important point. After the death of two Anal evangelists, Christian work continued amongst the group under the leadership of one convert from the Kom tribe. Pettigrew wrote that 'the Manipur New Testament and the Manipuri hymn-book are being used by these Anal Christians. Manipuri is being taught in their schools. So far no attempt has been made to start anything in their own tongue.'<sup>18</sup>

The devotion to their own tongue differed between these two tribes. As Pettigrew wrote of the Koms:

The Koms although small in number are very patriotic. They longed to be independent as far as their mother tongue is concerned. They have prepared and printed an Elementary Primer for their schools, and now in the press is a *hymn-book in their own tongue* ... this is another language which their young evangelists have been instrumental in reducing to writing under our care and training.<sup>19</sup>

The conversion of new groups of people to Christianity was followed by the need for

printed literature in their own distinct dialect (Supplee, 1945). Reflecting the aspirations of the native converts for a written word in their spoken language, as well as a missionary in their midst, Tanquist, one of the missionary to Manipur stated that:

Everyone of, say, twenty language groups, where there are Christians, would welcome a foreign missionary to come and live in their midst and learn their particular language. There is no language group so insignificant that it cannot find some missionary adequately supported by some organization in America when it known that there is need and the way is open.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover villages were reported to be ‘crying for teachers’. With this manifested desires for literature in each dialect, translation work became more challenging for the mission workers.<sup>21</sup> The Christian missionaries were aware of the need for a common language for the many dialect groups and to some extent had followed the state order to impose Manipuri language. They were however enthusiastic supporters for the vernacular of the people when confronted by the attachment of the people to their own dialect.

Speaking for the native converts and their ‘plans, policies and hopes for the immediate future’, Tanquist pointed out the specific need of the Christian converts. In his observation Bible Schools as well as Teacher Training Schools were needed where the ‘vernacular of the people’ was to be the medium of teaching. More than one printing press was required due to the demand for printed materials in ‘many languages’. The urgency as Tanquist pointed out was because ‘the tribes are up and organizing in a political way’.<sup>22</sup> It was implicit that dialect groups began to develop an active consciousness as a collective group. The missionaries were conscious of such developments amongst the natives. They proposed policies and plans for mission work in accordance with the new developments.

In missionary accounts, the native evangelist’s enthusiasm for his village or people was translated as that of his tribe. The headmaster of the Ukhrul School gave up his school work and his plan to study medicine to work in his village. His motivation according to the missionary was ‘a strong feeling that God was calling him *to give the Gospel to his own tribe*’ (Crozier, 1921). Christianity spread from village to village linking people of the same dialect. On the other hand, a Meitei active in mission work was reported to have a desire to work amongst ‘his own race’ referring to the valley inhabitants who were known to be different from the hill people in racial terms (*Ibid.*).

Language or dialect as a basis of identity becomes prominent with the coming of Christianity and evangelism within the region. The Christian converts as members of the church in Ukhrul were understood and identified by the missionary as a component of different tribes. As Pettigrew remarked, ‘we have representatives of three tribes living within the state of Manipur in the Christian Community at Ukhrul’.<sup>23</sup> This Christian community is by no means a smooth replacement of the heathen community that the convert previously belonged to. The community brought together by an acceptance of Christianity does not represent a homogenous group in which their differences melt away. The native converts were incorporated into the community



with their tribal identity being recognised and prominent. What is however being pushed to the background is their identity as a heathen community living in a particular village of their own choice. In other words, the villages where they belonged became an irrelevant basis of identification compared to their linguistic affiliation represented by the missionaries as a tribe.

Seeing hostility or enmity as an essential characteristics of tribes, missionaries hoped to remove 'clannishness' among the converts through the Christian message of peace. By 1918, active mission work was being carried out in as many as five different areas within the hills. The first general meeting of all Christians from different parts of the state was held at Ukhurul. In this meeting the Manipur Baptist Association was formed as the first Christian organisation representing the whole area (Brock, n.d.: 29). Thus, Christianity led to the formation of organisation and association beyond the bounds of village. By 1943, the increasing number of Christians numbered around 12,000 (*Ibid.* 31). In an area which was the home of diverse group of people living in bounded villages, these associations therefore brought together people beyond the confines of the village. At the same time, it was also during the gatherings and interactions in these associations that distinctions became more discernible. In one such meeting, the language diversity and lack of common language among the Christian converts became very conspicuous. A new missionary in Kangpokpi attended a worship service in the church at Kangpokpi Mission station. He was surprised by the announcement of every song in five different languages (Ahlquist, 1939). Apart from the lack of a common language among the converts, this arrangement at the worship service showed the attachment and loyalty of the different tribes to their own language.

Initially organized into a single body of believers, the Christian organisation formed by the converts irrespective of village or dialect eventually began to dissociate along geographical and linguistic lines. The association was soon replaced by three separate ones 'which were joined together in a common bond of fellowship and service by means of a general organisation, the Manipur Baptist Convention' (Brock, (Nd.): 31). In 1945 the missionary described Manipur as a challenging mission field. According to him, mission work undertaken in 'Manipur State' further divided into three large areas was a 'huge task'. Rather than the size of the territory, what makes Manipur such a challenging mission field was the many 'distinct languages'. 'The Northeast area', as the missionary elaborated was, 'mainly Tangkhul Nagas', the 'Northwest area, mainly Thadou Kukis and Kacha Nagas', and the 'Central area, with a dozen distinct languages such as ... The Taraos, Anals, Koms, Lemkangs, and Marings... the Kabuis... the Maos and Marams' (*Ibid.*)

A missionary further described these three geographical divisions of the region as occupied by a heterogeneous 'tribal groups' as he said:

...our field has been divided geographically into three associational areas. These areas are far from homogenous with respect to tribal groups ... the oldest and the largest of the Associations is the North East, or the Ukhurul area. These are chiefly Tangkhuls with a few thousand Thadou Kuki and other Kuki and Naga tribes (Anderson, 1947).

Moreover, the Christian converts in each of these three main areas desired to have a missionary for each area instead of one missionary looking after the whole area from one central mission station (Supplee, 1945).

### **Conclusion**

Mission encounter unleashed a new process of identity formation and resulted in developments that facilitated the reformulation or reshaping of identities. The fragmentation of the heathen village marked an important change in the identity of the people in the hill areas. Due to this unsettlement, religion or village or a chief could no longer serve as the primary marker of cohesive group identity. Language becomes an important marker of identity. The interaction between the missionaries and their native informants shaped the identity of converts through a frame occupied by religion, language and culture (Juneja, 2006: 1040). This new understanding of the self led to the predominance of linguistically-bounded groups among the hill inhabitants as the basis of identification. Indeed, conversion to Christianity entailed changes. However, by showing that it was not an easy process of change or a smooth transformation, the specific shape that subsequent changes produce, as this paper has shown, was an outcome of a transcultural encounter.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Resolutions at Sibsagar Conference, *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU)*, 1895, pp. 4-5, in *History of Christianity in Manipur: Source Material* compiled by Elungkiebe Zeliang, Guwahati, 2005, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Long Journey into Manipur’, Kangpokpi-Assam, American Baptist Foreign Mission Society [hereafter ABFMS] Records 1817-1969, Acc. No. 3257, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library [hereafter NMML].

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> ‘A recent letter dated December 5<sup>th</sup> 1912, from Government to our Mission reads: “I beg to say that the Vice –President of the Manipur State Darbar will be glad if you communicate to him your schemes for educational work among the Kukis as soon as possible in order that he may know what provision to propose in next year’s budget. He will also be glad to know what evangelizing schemes you propose.” Ukhrul Field Report for 1913 by William Pettigrew, The Assam Mission Conference of the ABFMS, 1913, p.56-59 in *History of Christianity in Manipur: Source Materials*, compiled by Elungkiebe Zeliang, p.39.

<sup>5</sup> Pettigrew pointed out that mere teaching was ineffective to ‘People situated at these ... living far away from civilized parts, very rarely coming in contact with the outside

world, are apt to be very conservative in their beliefs...generations of ignorance and superstition engendered in their lives shows us how absolutely useless it is to merely teach them...' (Pettigrew, 1907: 45).

<sup>6</sup> Pettigrew wrote: 'As more opportunities of conversing with them have been given us, we find those who can speak Manipuri with any fluency are a great deal in the minority. We feel it, therefore, important to learn their language, and this has been part of the daily routine. By the end of the rains it is hoped there will be sufficient known to enable us to go and preach the gospel to the villages around.' (Pettigrew, 1897: 19).

<sup>7</sup> Report from the Tangkhul Naga Field by W. Pettigrew, The Assam Mission of the ABMU, 1899, in *Forty Years Mission in Manipur: Mission Reports of Rev. William Pettigrew*, compiled by Solo and Mahangthei, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Report from the Tangkhul Naga Field, Pettigrew, 1899, ABFMS Records 1817-1969, Acc. No. 3257, NMML.

<sup>9</sup> As the missionary report about the language situation shows as follows: My tour during January, February and half of March took me to 44 non christian and 4 Christian villages, including Thadou Kuki, Mhar, Kacha Naga and Kabui Naga villages. 41 of these had never been visited by a missionary before; most of them are in the extreme western part of the State. The Welsh missionary at Haflong has prepared a school primer, a hymn book, and Mark and Matthew in a Kacha Naga dialect so nearly like my central western section of Kachas that we are using his books; but as yet these seem not suitable for the other two sections of that tribe in Manipur. The Kabui Nagas are still using the Manipuri books but would like to have their hymn book printed. G.G. Crozier, 'Evangelistic Report-Manipur', 1930, MS.ABM Field Report, CBCNEIL.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Report on Manipur, 1930, MS.ABM Field Report, CBCNEIL.

<sup>12</sup> All of these books have been printed and published under the support of the British and Foreign Bible society. William Pettigrew, 'Report on Literature, 1931, American Baptist Mission, Manipur, Assam', MS.ABM Field Report, CBCNEIL.

<sup>13</sup> Report on Manipur , n.d., MS.ABM Field Report, CBCNEIL.

<sup>14</sup> "Manipur and Two of its Hill tribes" by William Pettigrew in the paper clip file at CBCNEI Office, Guwahati Assam, pp. 470-73 in, *History of Christianity in Manipur: Source Material*, compiled by Zeliang, pp. 126-127.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> 'The two Anal converts who entered the school at Ukhrul in 1913 similarly 'returned to preach the Gospel to their tribe. Their efforts were blessed, and although the Lord seemed pleased to take them early to Himself, the seed sown by them bore much fruit. Christian groups have been formed in sixteen different localities in that area, their total numbering over 800 in the last report of 1932. Primary schools in eight of these groups are helping the young and old to read and write, to become leaders and teachers of their community in the near future.' in *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> William Pettigrew, 'Manipur and Two of its Hill Tribes' in the paper clip file at CBCNEI Office, Guwahati, Assam, pp. 470-73 in, *History of Christianity in Manipur:*

*Source Material*, compiled by Zeliang, p.129.(year unclear but the report referred to the census of 1931)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128.

<sup>19</sup> William Pettigrew, 'Manipur and Two of its Hill Tribes' in the paper clip file at CBCNNEI Office, Guwahati, Assam, 1931. pp. 470-73 in, *History of Christianity in Manipur: Source Material*, compiled by Zeliang, pp. 127-128.

<sup>20</sup> J.E. Tanquist, 'Naga Hills District and Manipur State', MS.ABM Field Report, CBCNEIL.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Ukhrul by William Pettigrew, The Assam Baptist Missionary Conference, 1910 in, *Forty Years Mission in Manipur: Mission Reports of Rev. William Pettigrew*, compiled by Rev.Solo and Rev.Mahangthei, p. 57.

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