

CHAPTER 4

RITUAL PRACTICES AND THE DYNAMICS OF CONVERSION

4.1 Introduction

J H Hutton, who authored the first extensive ethnographic monograph on the Angami Nagas, wrote that the Angamis, though possessing only a vague idea of a supernatural being, “has a very clear idea of how gods should be served”, and “those who so serves them otherwise shall die, if not physically, at least socially” (Hutton, 1969, p. 177). It is evidently clear from the study of Hutton that the ‘Angami religious system’ was rooted in ‘practices’ rather than conceptual coherence or a systematic theology. In this context, it is crucial and indispensable to understand the ritual aspect of Angami indigenous religion, or *Kriina*, since, ritual consists of symbolic actions that represent religious meanings (McGuire, 2012, p. 17). An Angami as a ritualist being, expressed their experiences in the form of rites and rituals in order to understand reality and maintain a relationship with reality. Rituals become the symbolic actions that define the relationship in which human stand, not only relationships with the divine, the ancestors or spiritual being, but also societal relationships with other humans and with nature and everything therein (Beyers, 2010). Therefore, rituals are also ways of symbolizing unity of the group (McGuire, 2012, p. 17).

Scholars have noted that in the cosmological worldview of the Nagas, the village manifest itself as a ‘ritual unit’ (Wouters, 2017, p. 21). The rules and prohibitions relating to leaving or not leaving the village boundaries; imposing certain spatially acceptable positions and movement in or about the village home; excluding or ‘cloistering’ certain categories of people; burying the death inside or outside the village depending on the nature of the death; etc., are all practices deeply embedded in religious beliefs that takes village as the central spatial unit. Joshi suggested that these themes of internal, external and other forms of spatiality and movement give a kind of tangible structure which are and which are not safe to cross and conveys that rituals must be carried out as prescribed, lest misfortune occur (Joshi, 2012, p. 82).

This chapter will elaborate the ritual aspects of *Kriina*, focusing more specifically on life cycle rituals *sekrenyi*- the sanctification of body, and agriculture related rituals. While highlighting the ritual practices, this chapter will explore the theme on why convert? In this regard, it draws attention to a significant dimension of conversion that has remained relatively unexplored in the existing literature on the Christianisation of the Nagas. Foregrounding the centrality of ritual practices, this chapter argue that understanding the integral components of *Kriina* belief system is also crucial for understanding a major factor behind conversion to Christianity. This chapter contends that there is a strong connection between the elaborate ritual practices and the motivating factors for conversion. A deeper understanding of *Kriina* through ritual practices thus points to complex and multiple narratives of conversion.

4.2 Life events (rites and rituals)

Malinowski termed the phases of human life as the ‘crisis of life’ which he said, are surrounded by an inextricably mixed-up medley of beliefs and rites (Malinowski, 1948, p. 20). The act of communion or the ceremonies establishes not only a social event in the life of the individual but also a spiritual metamorphosis (Malinowski, 1948, p. 23). Writing from the African context, the crisis of life according to John Pobee is marked by religious rituals which has ‘schema’, dynamics comprising process and structure. Three things characterised the schema: a) separation, a rite of separation; b) marge, a rite of transition; c) agrégation, a rite of incorporation. (Pobee, 1976, p. 13). Elaborate rites and rituals also attend the life cycle of an Angami which are meticulously observed. These practices are windows into the religious soul of *Kriina*.

4.2.1 Birth

When a child is born, the mother and the baby are confined to a separate space for three days to observe the rituals and no one is allowed to come and touch the baby till it gets over. She will not sleep on the bed but sleep on the floor, on a bamboo mat. On the first day after the child’s birth, a hen is killed if the baby is a girl and a cock for the baby boy. The hen is cooked in a separate utensil from a separate fireplace made exclusively for the *nanyü* (ritual). The other family members are not allowed to eat the meat except the mother which she has to finish it on the next day itself before the sunset and the leftover has to be thrown away.

On the third day, all the cooking utensils, the sleeping mat and leftover burned firewood are taken out through the back wall and kept outside at the back of the house. After this, the mother will go and fetch water from the nearest pond accompanied by a child of the same sex as the infant. On their way back, the mother will pluck two leaves of *tsowhe* (a plant with sharp edges), a *hepfü* (*pfü* indicates male) for the baby boy or a *henu* (*nu* indicates female) if the child is a girl. She will place the leaves on the child's forehead and then snaps it into two and say the blessing words, *lhou ketsowhe he ketsohu tuo we* (you will grow up like this *tsowhe*, this plant has a rough edge which cuts if touched) in the sense that the child will grow up with strength and appears formidable before her/his enemies. She will iterate the same on the child's left chest, right and left arms and feet. In Mezoma village, this ritual is called *tsowhe bie pie u kha* (symbolising the protection of the baby with the plant). After this, the mother will bath the baby with the water drawn from the pond and this act is called *dzürülu wate ho* 'bathing the baby'. Until this ritual is done no one is allowed to have physical contact with the child or the mother in the belief that the breach of the ritual will have the consequences of the child growing up to develop hatred toward his/her siblings termed as *kesoca*.

On the fourth day, the grandfather will name the newly born child. According to Das, the naming of the child has a jurial significance which marks the formal incorporation of the child as a new member into the family. It signifies the establishment of a strong kinship bond between the child and the kinsmen both ceremonially as well as jurally (Das, 1993, p. 51).

On the sixth day, a ritualistic visit called *tsukhrü* (first field visit) is made to the nearest field and it should be *kharu sie* (outside the village gate). The mother carries the child, put on her basket with a gourd filled with a little bit of rice beer and a handful of rice to eat in the field. The infant is made to touch the implements of agriculture and the soil 'just as a token' (Joshi, 2012, p. 89). The mother will work in the field 'just as a token' and after which she will touch the infant's lip with drop of rice beer and a grain of rice 'just as a token'. In Viswema village, the husband will accompany the mother and the child to the field. They will place two feathers towards the east and pluck a leave of *ciena* (wormwood) and return back. While returning they will again put two feathers near the village gate and return back. This act symbolises the movement of the newly corporate member across the village or *khel* gate (Das, 1993, p. 50).

On the same day, a *phouse* (chaste) unmarried boy or a girl of the same sex as infant will carry the baby and make a visit called *phere khrii* (first relative visit) to a family of the same clan for blessing. The family which is chosen to visit should be 'clean', which means that there should not have been any incidence of death in recent past. The visited family will bless the infant and send back the child home with a *heicha of zu* (bottle of rice beer). Apart from these rituals in Kohima village, a day will be fixed for the *Liva-u* to come and perform a ritual and the *zievo* in Khonoma and Mezoma village. In the name of the child, he will hold a fowl and take it behind the village gate and kill the fowl cutting off its head and observe the position of the dying fowl's legs to predict the omens (the details of what the dying fowl's leg position signify is explained in the *sekrenyi* section). Once the ritual is done, he can take the body of the fowl to his home for consumption.

4.2.2 Marriage

The Angamis are monogamous and exogamous (Hutton, 1969, p. 219). The Zuonuo-Keyhonuo attach immense importance to marriage, not only because it is the sole means to the most ardently desired of all ends, the procreation of the legitimate children, but also because no man and or woman can adequately satisfy all his or her wants or lead a normal social life, after maturity, without a spouse (Das, 1993, p. 60). Though the actual marriage procession is simple, the before and aftermath are attended by complex rites and every step has to be manoeuvre prudently.

Parents are responsible to arrange the marriage of their children and it is considered as the foremost obligation of the parents. The ceremonial marriage entails a certain amount of expenses and formality. A man who intends to get married gets his father to appoint a *thenulie kechiimia* (messenger) who is usually his father's sister or his sister-in-law or could be an elderly person from his clan. She should be someone who is considered to be eloquent and appears to be in good relation with the girl's parents.

She will bring the proposal to the potential girl's family with the most appropriate decorated words. She makes all the arrangement and there is no intercourse between the parties. A day will be fixed for the potential bride and bridegroom for a ritualistic visit to the field and do *narhu khru* (bury a plant) and asked to note their dream on the same night. If their dreams are bad, the marriage is call off, but if both their dreams have been good, then they will proceed and fix the marriage date and for which a new moon night should

be avoided. The messenger will ask the girl's parents if they want a *thevü nhyü* (Chicken marriage) or *thevo nhyü* (pig marriage) and accordingly they will negotiate what Das (1993, p. 64) termed 'bride wealth'. A bride wealth consists of *thema ngo* meaning 'priced spear', pigs and fowls. In Mezoma village, if it is a pig marriage, which can be afforded only by the rich people, the girl will ask for one pig but the groom has to give two pigs because giving the exact asked number is considered a shame but giving more is a sign of showing respect to the bride's family. The chicken marriage is the more prevalent and affordable marriage opted by the people. In both the pig and chicken marriage, the groom's family has to give fifteen to sixteen fowls or more along with a *kemesa vü* (clean chicken/rooster). The *kemesa vü* should have an unblemished feather with intact toes and spur. This unblemished rooster is not supposed to be kept for rearing or should not be by any chance cooked and eaten by the bride in the belief that an unhappy married life called *terhuo dzüzi* (depressed) will befall upon the new married couple. The fowls received from the groom are to be distributed among the girl's kindred.

The mother of the bride will prepare her daughter's basket. There will be a plate, cup, hoe, a bamboo container filled with varieties of seeds - grain, maize, perilla, job's tear, beans, pumpkin. She will also pack rice, meat and rice beer. The mother will lift the basket to the bride's head and she is sent off to the groom's house. The marriage takes place at night and the procession is composed of the bride, an old lady and a young chaste girl and boy. The groom will give the *thema ngo* which is considered sacred therefore, it should be a newly furnished spear and once given to the bride's parents, it should be kept in a corner not to be smeared by blood or used to kill animals. One hen each to the old lady and the girl and a rooster to the boy. That night the old lady and the boy will go back leaving the girl with the bride for the night. The bride will eat and drink only the food and rice beer packed by her mother and not the food prepared at groom's place. For the next five nights, the groom will sleep in *morung*¹. On the second day of marriage, groom will make a separate hearth for the bride and the girl to cook their own food which has to be eaten that day itself and after this she can eat food cooked from the main hearth. On the fifth day, the bride and groom will make a ritualistic visit to the field called *tsukhrü* (first field visit) and

¹ Boy's dormitory.

work 'just as a token', collect two sticks of alder and come back. The marriage ritual is completed.

After a completion of one year of marriage, the bride's parents have to prepare meat and *zu* to be given as *gaka*, meaning 'to give curry', during the festival of *sekrenyi*. The bride's parents will brew *litei*² of *zu* and cooked a big pot of meat and give to their married daughter. Besides, her relatives and clan member will also give meat and *zu*. The quantity varies according to the degree of the closeness of their relationship ranging from two pieces of meat and one cup of *zu* to twenty pieces of meat and a *lifü*³ of *zu*. These, she will take back to her husband's place and give a feast to his relatives. After her first child is born, her parents will give her *nuoi* (gift given by bride's parents) to her, which she and her husband will give a feast to his relatives. The amount of *zu* and meat given during *nuoi* is same as the quantity of *zu* and meat given during *sekrenyi gaka*. It is interesting to note that the transaction is never one sided or a one-time transaction. Marriage is an expensive affair for the bride's side to which Kurino Chüsi⁴ commented that 'a disobedience girl bring shame to her parents and relatives but if she obeys also, she emptied her parents' wealth in times of her marriage, it is easier to be on the groom's side'. Either way a girl is at the receiving end in meeting the outcome.

4.2.3 Death and burial

Though the Angami have a vague idea of the aftermath of death, death being the supreme and the final crisis of life (Malinowski, 1948, p. 29), the funeral rites and rituals have to be meticulously done. Death, they dreaded but to be buried without any ritual called *peyo*, is something they cannot imagine. The ritual for the dead is considered as one of the most elaborated rituals and the attitude of the Angami towards death is rather complex. As delivered by Malinowski, the emotions of the survivors are extremely complex and even contradictory; the dominant elements, love of the dead and loathing of the corpse, passionate attachment to the personality still lingering about the body and a shattering fear of the gruesome thing that has been left over, these two elements seem to mingle and play

² A big woven pot plastered with resin and used for storing brew.

³ Traditional water container.

⁴ Kurino Chüsi is 57 years old and got converted at the age of 30 years. She is a farmer. Interviewed on 28th February 2021, Mezoma village.

into each other (Malinowski, 1948, p. 30). All this spontaneous behaviour is reflected in the ritual proceedings at death. Angami burials take account of the dead person's life and how death will in future affect the living who remain (Joshi, 2012, p. 90).

There are two types of death: *kesia* (normal death) and *kesia siasuo* (bad death or 'apotia'⁵ death). According to the nature of the death, the mourning, funeral rites and the burial will differ. The Angamis bury their dead. Those who die a normal death are buried within the premises of the village. It is not an uncommon sight to see the graves in front of the house or along the village path which indicates their love and respect of the dead.

Once the body is declared dead, 'Just as a token' the body is washed by a young girl or a boy of the same sex as the dead. She will put a pinch of salt in the dead's palms, place a piece of necklace in her mouth and she will wash her hair with *tsünyü* (an herbal plant used to wash hair). The washed dead body is placed on the wooden bed in the first room of the house. After this ritual, in Khonoma and Mezoma village, the ritual proceeds with a person bringing a cow called *pi*, cow killed in the name of the dead is called *u-pi/puo pi*, tie with *sokrino*⁶ and place the plantain rope in the dead's right hand which they believe the soul will drag the cow to *terhuo ra*, 'land of the dead'. He will bring out the cow and kill it. Unless, this cow has been killed no other rituals can proceed, the *siazhiemia* (mourners) cannot mourn the dead and the family members cannot eat or drink. The meat of the cow is cut and distributed among the clan members and only a man of ingenuity is entrusted with the task of meat distribution. This meat is called *rüle* which is to be cooked and eaten on the second day of the death. Some portion of meat called *thepi* or *theprie* is cooked for all the mourners to eat. *Thepi* is cooked with only salt and without ginger, therefore, it is usually tasteless and the mourners eat the meat announcing *thepi cü mecü* (I hate to eat *thepi*) as an act of cursing death. In Viswema village, the cattle which is bought for the funeral rite is killed and after setting aside the liver and head, divide the flesh and large portions are given to those whom he has a close friendship bond.

⁵ Haimendorf in his manuscript gives a description on 'apotia' death among the Konyak tribe. 'Apotia' is death by drowning or falling off a tree, death in childbirth and sudden death without clear illness (1936). For the Angami who die an apotia death are buried outside the village gate without performing funeral rites.

⁶ A plant used to tie things.

It is said that poverty befalls on the family if death is a frequent visitor because if the deceased family do not own cattle for *u-pi*, they have to exchange a plot of paddy field with a cow which ultimately drain their wealth. Therefore, one has to perform the funeral rites diligently and observe all the *genna* which otherwise may usher in more devastation to the family.

As soon as the news of a death is received, the whole village is declared *genna* and people who are working in the field will leave their work and come back to the village. The clan's members will gather near the house; women will sit inside the house and wail and men comes ululating⁷ and shouting words of regret to part ways. It is taboo for lineage members of the deceased to go to field for one day after the death and for the inner lineage two days. At the widest circle of kinship all those kinsmen mourning the death and abstaining from regular work for a day are identified as members forming a group of *sena* which Das called 'funeral kinship' (Das, 1993, p. 56). The funeral rites are usually performed by the male relatives of the deceased. There will be two persons who first starts the digging of the grave and three people to make the coffin and two people to cut the ritual cow. These people are called *mhiethemie* who are given the responsibility to take care of everything from the time a person died till the burial.

The Angamis buried their dead with the head laid in the direction of west which is in the line of belief that the soul will rise up facing the east⁸. In traditional burial, the coffin without a lid is lodge in the grave. One of the *mhiethemie* will pour a basket of grain in the grave on top of the laid body, a charcoal and a chick. This are given with the belief that the soul of the dead will use these to make ritual when their soul go down to the land of dead.

The second day of the death is called *theprie rüle* (cooking the ritual meat). On this day, *punumi* (the inner lineage) (Das, 1993, p. 56) will come and cook the *rüle* (meat) and the head of the cow after which they place all the skulls on the grave. The cooked meat is called *morhu*, which literally means 'unclean meat'. The meat is cook in different hearth for each family and it has to be eaten before sunset, if not the *morhu* leftover should be

⁷ The types of ululate differs depending on occasion. In times of war the kind of ululate is heard as war cry, during death it is for expressing sorrow and lamentation, on the way to field the ululate differs again and in times of celebration.

⁸ The land of the dead is believed to be situated towards east.

given away to relative who belongs to a different clan. The meat is *morhu* for the clan member but once given out to the relatives of different *khel*, it becomes *mo sa* meaning ‘clean meat’ for them. Therefore, they can eat and dry the leftover. *Siaru* ritual is initiated by the *Livau* on the second night after the death. He will come and boiled the liver. He will take a small piece of liver, two-three grains of rice and wrap them in a plantain and accordingly he will made thirty pieces of this wrap. In Viswema village, the portions are seventeen which is buried on the fourth day. He will bury them outside the house, this is done in the belief that if the soul of the dead passed through a place called *rünyü gei* (way to the land of dead) and have to stay there for 30 days, in that duration of time the soul will eat the wrapped liver and rice. The dead soul cannot enter the *terhuo ra* till the 30 days have been completed. After this ritual, the *Livau* will clean the hearth and throw the ashes outside. After this he will take all the leftover meat and go to his house at midnight when he thinks everyone is asleep. The *Punumi* will observe *kenyü* for 5 days and 30 days for the family member, it is taboo for them to go to field. Every fifth day of the 30 days, the deceased family has to put a little bit of rice beer in a cone shape plantain and place it on the grave. This ritual is called *kesiamia mekhru jie*. After the completion of 30 days the family will kill a chicken and do the ritual of *kinu thophi* to clean the home. After this, the family can start involving in the normal course of life except staying away from the merrymaking event for sometimes or till the completion of one year anniversary of the death.

4.3 *Sekrenyi* – sanctification of the body

Sekrenyi, the sanctification festival, is regarded as one of the most important festivals for the Angamis. During those days when men gain recognition and their bravery is tested through warfare, hunting and sports, it is vital for every man to sanctify their *phou* ‘body and soul’. It signifies the cleansing of every bad luck and aura lingering around him and to strengthen his *phou* for any task coming ahead in that year. It is also the time for young boys to be inducted once they reach 4 to 5 years. Before this, they will be sleeping with their mother but partaking in this ritual marks the manhood of a young boy and after which they are allow to sleep in the *morung* or with his father. The sanctification has to be taken very seriously to the extent that during the observation of the ritual, women are not allow to touch or come near man in the fear of defiling the man.

This festival is called *phousanyi*, *phousa* meaning ‘to clean the body and soul’ and *nyi* meaning ‘festival’. The ritual of sanctifying the body is called *sekre*, hence the festival is generally termed as *sekrenyi* (Shürhuozelie, 1981, p. 1). *Sekrenyi* is celebrated between the months of December and March and the celebration begin on the twenty-fifth day of the month in an Angami year. However, the celebration month is not fixed as it could differ from village to village depending on the region based agricultural cycle.

Eight days before *sekrenyi*, the village *zievo* will make an announcement called *sekrenyi nyishie* announcing the celebration of *sekrenyi*. After this announcement is given, the villagers have to finish all the necessary physical work; field work, carry firewood because once *sekrenyi* begins it is taboo to do any physical work.

On day one, *sekrenyi* begins with the ritual *kijie*, closest literal meaning could be ‘decking the house’ (*kide* in Viswema village). The mother in the family will wake up early in the morning and before she talks to anyone, she will do the *kijie*. For *kijie*, the mother will make a pretentious *zu* which Shürhuozelie (1981, p. 2) mentioned it as symbolically imitating the traditional process of making *zu*. A few grains of rice are soaked overnight, and the next morning it is pounded on a mortar. Then it is placed in a pot and sprinkle a pinch of *khri* (yeast) and pour water over it. After pounding she will put the pound rice in a cup (used exclusively for ritual) and mix it with water and add a pinch of yeast, this *zu* is called *zumho*. This preparation is poured into a cone-shaped plantain and fixed it to *kicie*, the main post of the house and pour another one and placed it to *kinu seku*, the last room of the house. The *kijie* offering is also placed on those graves which are still in good condition. All the male members who are going to do *sekre* should be there at home when the mother is doing the *kijie* without which they are not allow to do the *sekre* ritual. In Khonoma and Mezoma villages, the *kijie* ritual should be done only by the mother in the family and in cases of a widower, an unmarried girl is invited to do the ritual. While in Kohima and Viswema, in the absence of a woman, the eldest man in the family can do the *kijie*.



Image 4.1: Krovotsole Chaya Preparing for the ritual *kijie*
Source: Fieldwork, Viswema village



Image 4.2: Krovotsole Chaya performing the *kijie* ritual
Source: Fieldwork, Viswema village



Image 4.3: Krovotsole Chaya pouring zu into her husband's cup after *kijie*.
Source: Fieldwork, Viswema village

In Viswema village, the second day is for the men to collect plantain to use as plates and cups. The leaves should not have any marks or tears. They will also collect three straight branches of a tree⁹ which should be in perfect shape to make a hearth. While in Kohima village, on the *kijie* day, men will clean the well, and collect plantain and wood to make a fireplace.

The third day is called *dziise va*. On this day, all the male members who are going to do *sekre* have to wake up at dawn and go to a spring well to fetch water. Every *khel* will have its own separate well which they have to keep it clean beforehand. Women are not allowed to fetch water or go near the spring well. Once reaching the spring well, two elder persons, one from *thevo* lineage and one from *thepa* lineage will initiate the ritual. They will pluck two twigs called *ciena* (wormwood), the elder among the two, could be *thevo* or *thepa*, will fix his twig on the right side of the well and the younger one will fix his twig on the left side. The two men will scoop away the outer surface of the water and they will sprinkle water on their forehead, left chest, right and left hands and right and left knee followed by other men. They will also sprinkle water on their weapons – gun, spear and dao, and say the blessing words *kenha kera kecüko khawa di kevi keshürho-u chiütuo, mia bieliel kelho bielieluo* (bad things which impede our life shall be removed and good health will prevail). They will fill their water container which is used for the proceeding ritual, fire their guns and return to the village.



Image 4.4: The spring well used for the body sanctification ritual.

Source: Field work, Khonoma village

⁹ Tree which are sturdy and has beautiful name are used for the ritual, given that it is not inhabited by birds or animals. *Pedu* tree is mostly use for making hearth.



Image 4.5: *Sekre* meat and a plantain cup

Source: Fieldwork, Viswema village



Image 4.6: Yose chaya observing *sekre*. There are three hearths, one each for him and his two sons.

Source: Fieldwork, Viswema village

On reaching their house, the first thing is to make a fire by the method of *seguomiki* and lit the fire in the *ki-lo* (front part of the house). The collected three wood is erected and make a fireplace to cook the food. All the rituals are carried out separately in the *ki-lo*. Women are not allowed to come near this ritual space. For eating food and drinking *zu*, they will use a plantain plate and cup.

After which a fowl is killed for the ritual *thevüthophi* to read their omen. In Mezoma village, the father or the eldest in the family will strangle a fowl's neck and say *a ciethie rhiphi thecie tsolietuo ro, buose base shi* (if I will stay alive till next year then release your excreta). The omens are considered by reading certain parts of the dying fowl. The position of the legs is observed, if the legs are not crossing over and remain in the same length and position with the nails brushing each other it is considered as a good sign. If there is a gap between the legs and not touching each other then it is a sign of increasing coverage of field work for that year. If the first toes of the right leg go under the first toes of the left leg, it is predicted as a good sign. Another way of predicting the omen is by observing the position of the appendix. The intestine of the chicken is pulled out from its anus and if there is blood on the appendix there is fear of people getting injured by accident that year.

Two feathers are plucked out from the wing and stick the appendix on the feather and fix one feather on the right-side post and one is on the main post of the house.

After this, the chicken is cleaned and cut into pieces. The chicken liver which is killed for the eldest in the family is taken out and cooked separately in a pot before the other meat is cooked. The eldest in the family will take out the cooked liver on a plantain, tear it into pieces and mix it with ginger, this ritual is called *mhava* or *puo seva*. The eldest will say the blessing words *a cü mu krie kemonu achüse mu a zutsü hapie achü-aramia bu cüükrie kerüzü-kerüze thadi puote-peogei leituo we* (before I get to eat and drink, my enemy will get drowsy eating my chicken liver and I will capture and kill him/my enemy), and taste the liver followed by other men in decreasing order of age. The tasting of the *nanyü* liver is called *mecha*. The remaining liver is wrapped in a plantain and placed it behind the entrance door. It is said that if they have tasted the *nanyü* liver and drank the *zu*, and even if they were not able to complete the other proceeding ritual they can go to the battle. The chicken is cooked in a new unused pot and a new ladle, platter and cup. They will use plantain plates and plantain cups to eat and drink.

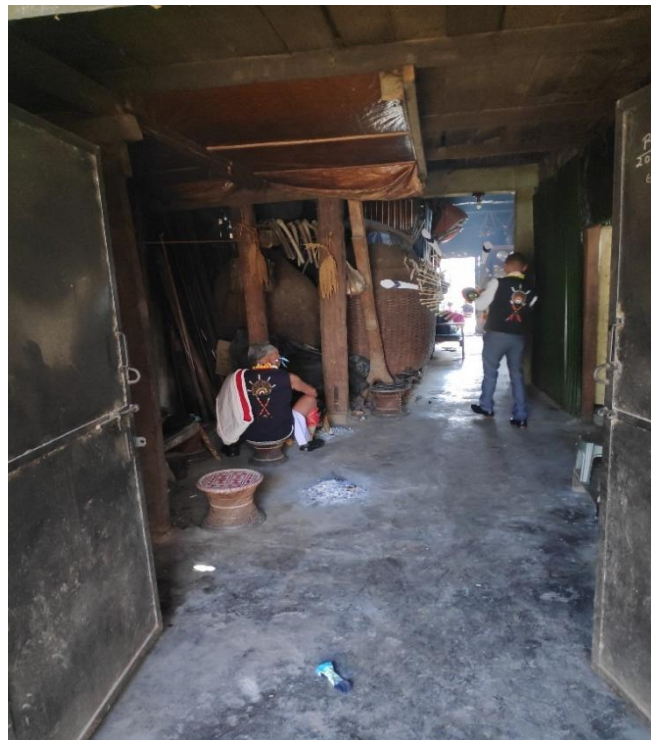


Image 4.7: The entrance of the house where *sekre* is observed

Source: Fieldwork

After this, in the afternoon there is a ritual called *thiva* or *thisie* (shooting a target fixed on a tree). It is for *phousou phoulou* or *phousoukechii*, the nearest meaning will be ‘to pay the price of our soul’. This ritual is observed in Mezoma and Khonoma village. For this, young boys will go to the jungle and collect wood to make *thi* (a kind of target). There is a tree for every *khel* called *thi-bo* where a *thi* is made and fixed on the tree. Once the *thi* is fixed, every man in that particular *khel* who are observing *sekre* will come with their *tsozi* (a cotton broom-like shrub) to hit the *thi*. An elder will inaugurate the act by throwing a wrap of earthworm excreta followed by the other men. One by one they will throw their *tsozi* to hit the *thi*, shouting *a ciethie rhi phi thecie sekrenyi nyi lalietuo ro hau bu thiu kehekhrie shi* (if I will live till next year *sekrenyi* let this hit the *thi*). The stick should hit the target or fly above it but not under the target. If it goes through under the target, it is feared that he will die. This act signifies throwing away the bad luck lingering his spirit and weak spirit and in return strengthening his spirit. Hitting the target means good luck in the sphere of war, hunting and sports.

In Mezoma and Khonoma villages, the ritual of *kijie* and *sekre* is observed on the same day, that is, the first day of *sekrenyi*¹⁰. The second day is called *mecha* (the act of eating the *sekre* meat and throwing away the leftovers). On *mecha*, he will eat the *sekre* meat and throw away the leftovers, which signifies the end of the ritual. He takes a bath with the water they brought from the spring well. A cup of ritual water is poured ‘just as a token’ in a bucket of water for taking a bath followed by cleaning the pots and utensils used for *sekre*. He will gurgle his mouth with the ritual water and say *mecha wate*. After this, he can drink *zu* again made without *khri* and eat food cooked from the common kitchen hearth.

On the third day, in Kohima village, in the afternoon there is *prouwa*. The act of drinking the *zu*, eating the *sekre* meat and throwing away the leftover is *prouwate*. After this, all the men who are observing *sekre* will take their machete and spear and go outside the village gate. They will go there and tell *sekresenuo* (*terhuomia* or believe to be a *sekre* spirit) *kie vi shiirhuo badi thecie nu lakhor lie* (go and take good care and come up next year again).

¹⁰ Vibha Joshi description of *sekrenyi* celebrated in Khonoma is different. According to her description, *kijie* and *sekre* are observed on the first and second day in sequence. And the *thisie* ritual is observed on the fourth day (2012, p. 107).

It marks the completion of *sekre* ritual and there is no more *kenyü* for the men to drink and eat food cooked from the common fireplace.

In Mezoma and Khonoma village, the third day of *sekrenyi* is for the youth to go to the jungle and collect a wild flower called *nyikro* or *niko* and have a grand feast.

The fourth day is *tirhü-the* (*tirhü* is the name of a shrub, *the* means extracting) where the whole community – men, women, youth and children will pack their lunch and go to the jungle. Women and girls will collect wild vegetables and the menfolk will go hunting. In the afternoon, they will have a feast and come back with their collections. Everyone will dress up in their traditional attire and the men will ululate, and fire their guns the whole time till they reach their destination.

On the fifth day of the festival, the youth in their *thetshü* (peer group) will gather at their *kikra krü ki* (group's parents' house) and engage in *cüzou* meaning 'beading the necklace'¹¹ with the collected *niko* flower. When the night comes, they will adorn themselves in their ceremonial attire, sing folksong and display a showcase where the villager will come and watch them. In Viswema village, the ceremonial possession is on the fourth day and carried out separately in each *khel*.

The display will go on for a few days and on the tenth day there is *jatso*¹². On *jatso*, all the households based on *morung*¹³ wise will bring the leftover or dried meat and make a porridge out of it and this is called *jatso galho* (*jatso* porridge). On the twelve days, there is *thenyi thena* (it can be loosely understood as asking for forgiveness if their merry-making has provoked the spirits)¹⁴ and there will be *penie* where it is taboo to go to the field. *Penie* is observed for all the merry-making activities lasted few days or else bad fortune may befall on them. This marks the end of *sekrenyi* festival.

The spatial movements of the participants make the connection between the spaces inside the village and those outside the village, and how the *khel*, as well as the village boundaries, are symbolically redrawn.

¹¹ If the thread snaps, there is a fear that one of the members will die.

¹² Specifically, in Mezoma village

¹³ There can be more than one *morung* in a clan

¹⁴ For the major festival this ritual is on 12th day and for the minor festival it is on the 4th day.

4.4 Agriculture related rituals

4.4.1 Ritual for seed sowing

After the completion of *sekrenyi* festival, it is the time of the year for the *tsiakro* (first seed sower) to inaugurate the seed sowing. Mezoneile Pucho¹⁵ whose maternal grandfather Dukha Tsükrü was a *tsiakro*, narrated the ritual procedure of seed sowing and the life of a *tsiakro*. She said her grandfather was a *tsiakro* of Viswema village for about 20 years and as a *tsiakro* he follows all the ritual diligently and with dignity. She lamented on how after her grandfather's retirement the position of *tsiakro* crumbled, since, the role of *tsiakro* requires conviction, commitment and is not a responsibility to be taken up by a mere somebody.

On the day of seed sowing, there will be *penie* for the whole village, hence, it is taboo to go to field and talk to outsiders. The *tsiakro* will go to one of his nearest field or a garden and he will plough a small area to sow. He will sow varieties of seeds: grain, maize, millet, job's tear, perilla, pumpkin and he will make a fencing over the sowing area. After this, he will carry a cup of *zu*, dao, hay-made-raincoat, seat and go to a small hut built near his house which he has to stay for the next five days. Once he entered the hut and he will close the entrance with two straight branches of *sokre sobu* (a tree which bears fruit with full of seeds inside). For five days he will not come out of the hut and should not talk to anyone. He will fast in the name of the whole community. When he feels that he is getting weak only then he will put a spoonful of *zu* into his mouth. He should not gulp down the *zu* else there is a fear that the thirst of the villagers will become unsatiable for that year. For that reason, he should drink one spoon of *zu* at a time provided his cup is kept behind his back and he has to scoop without turning his body. He has to sit in a particular style, he should not sit cross legged or both of his leg kept straight but with one leg folded and the one keeping straight in the belief that the water will be flooded and destroys the paddy.

After the completion of five days fasting, the ritual is over. He will step out from his hut shouting the name of a married couple, a family that has not encountered any incidents of death in the recent past. As he comes out shouting the name of the couple, he will pronounce the blessing words 'I have asked good things and coming back; I have asked increase of population for my people; I have asked abundance of wealth'.

¹⁵ Mezoneile Pucho is 63 years old and got converted around the age of 6. Interviewed on 12th January 2023. She is from Viswema village.

As a *tsiakro*, it is taboo for him to consume the meat of wild animals. He has to observe the ritual diligently or else if there is a misfortune in the village, all the blame will be put onto him. Besides, he has to observe all the *genna* including the trivial and minor ones which is not observed by the whole community. Therefore, a *tsiakro* is not supposed to engage in a daily wage earn labour and for which he gets a fee from every household.

4.4.2 Ritual for harvesting

The ritual associated with harvest is initiated and taken care by an elderly woman. She is generally referred to as *liedepfü* (*nousuopfü* in Viswema village and *bilipfü* in Khonoma and Mezoma village). It should be a woman to take up the role, since it is the woman who look after the family's granaries and keep track of everyday consumption of food in the kitchen. Therefore, there are a number of *kenyü* (taboo) which shape her life as a woman being the caretaker of the family's kitchen affairs. The taboo imposed on her life is not to restraint her but it is believed that if she breaks a taboo because of her negligence, there will not be enough food for the year besides, ill luck will befall her brother's life when he goes out for war, hunting and sports.

In Kohima village, when the *leide* (harvest) day is approaching, *liedepfü* will uproot a few ripe paddies, wrap it in a plantain leaf and keep it by the back of the village gate, hers will be the first in line followed by the paddy of other. When the day arrives, it will be *genna* for the whole village. She will go and cut off the paddies she kept by the village gate and bring it to her home from a basket. She will take two or three paddies, remove the husk and put them in her cooking rice pot by a corner where she can remember. After the rice has been cooked, she will take out the sacred rice on her platter and say the blessing words, *a ramia bu kedi kepu chütuo, vi shürhuo di u mhatho pfü kekralie kelho chütuo we* (my villagers will prosper and successful in accumulating wealth). After she completed the ritual, the whole village, the mother in the family, will do their *liede* ritual the next day just as what the *liedepfü* did. Besides this ritual, they have to select a bunch of paddies, uproot them, wrap it in a leaf, put it inside a gourd and keep it in a corner where no one should harvest it until the whole paddies have been harvested. It is taboo to harvest this scared or *nanyü* paddy which otherwise will lead to an escalating of harvest. This *nanyü* paddy will be harvested lastly and will be given to the *Liedepfü* as her fees.

In Mezoma village, on the day of the inauguration of harvest, the mother will take a handful of ashes, earthworm's excreta and buds of *kuchü* (a plant which sticks) and wrap

them together in a plantain leaf. She will take this wrap to the field and tie it along with the selected bunch of nine to ten paddies for the inauguration ritual. From this bunch, she will harvest three paddies and take it home. She will take the grain, take out the husk and cook the rice. All the family member will taste it starting from the head of the family till the youngest. After the completion of the harvest, the ritual paddies bunch is kept to be harvested at the last. On the day before *tiekede* (festival to marks the completion of harvest) the mother will go and harvest this bunch and bring it home. She will take out the grain and put two or three pieces into every basket of grain containers called *chü*. She will go and fetch water from the spring well which is outside the village gate and she will sprinkle the water on every grain basket container so as to avoid catching fire and as an act of cleansing the grain. This ritual signifies the ending of harvest. This ritual is done in the belief that there will be *mha cü pulie ketuo* (a frugal consumption of food).

Angami being an agricultural community, *tsiakro* and *liedepfü* play an important role. They are highly regarded and it is not a position which can be taken up without commitment. Starting from the day of the inauguration, the *liedepfü* has to observe *kenyü* for 30 days where she is forbidden to come outside of her house. She has to observe the 30 days diligently and all her needs are taken care of inside the house. However, in Mezoma Village, 30 days was reconsidered and the ritual days were brought down to 5 days since in the later days it has become a difficult task to find a person who is willing to sacrifice her working days for the community.

For every death in the village, they have to observe *genna* and for every minor *genna* he has to observe *kenyü*. Therefore, he cannot travel to other villages or if so, he cannot spend the night other than his village. For the position he occupied, he was entitled to receive grain as a fee from the villagers. However, as Mezzoneile Pucho have said the position of *tsiakro* has slowly ceased to exist with the death of her grandfather and later on, with all the members from *tsiakro* clan converted to Christianity there was none to take up the role. Likewise, when there was no *liedepfü* to inaugurate the harvest in Viswema village, once the *kemevo* announced the sowing of seeds or harvest, all the *Krüna* followers observed the inauguration day as *genna* and the eldest in the family performed the ritual of inauguration. The *genna* imposed upon the whole village where no one is allowed to go to field and the prohibition of outsiders coming inside the village have now shifted to family-based *genna*. In Viswema village, since a handful of people are following the *Krüna*, it is

not possible to detect the movement of every villager therefore, the community-based *genna* is now reduced to a family affair. Neizochonü Chaya said that every year she would inaugurate seeds sowing for her family as well as the inauguration of harvest. On being asked if she could be the *leidepfü* given that she is 90 years old, she said she could not be the *liedepfü* for Viswema village as she is not from the clan who can hold the position of *liedepfü*.

As discussed, there are numerous rituals, both at the levels of individual and community, that the adherent has to diligently observe. More importantly, village is a ritual unit, every ritual has to be initiated within the village gate under the supervision of the religious specialist. And given the religious specialist coming from a particular clan or *khel* (discussed in chapter 2), no other clan can occupy the position. *Krüna* religion is very specific of what is required from its adherent. It is a very demanding, not to say expensive, religion.

Despite the growing influence of Christianity, it was only in recent years that Christianity marked its full attendance in the three villages (out of the four research sites), namely, Kohima, Khonoma and Mezoma while *Krüna* is still found to be prevalent in Viswema village (the fourth research site). The conversion stories of many late converts in these villages offer fascinating insights into the complex narratives of conversion where belief in the tenets of Christianity is not always the primary factor. What emerges from many stories is conversion resulting from the inability to meet the expansive and meticulous demands of *Krüna*. With more people converting to Christianity or specifically if the whole clan of village priests gets converted, then it comes to the state of who will initiate the ritual or, who will bury the dead when all the relatives have converted to Christianity. The following sections expand on these discussions.

4.5 Conversion among the Nagas: An analysis of available literature

Religious conversion can be understood as the process by which a person commits to the beliefs of a new religious tradition and shifts away from the previously held religious beliefs. Historically, social scientists have explained conversion using a passive model of human behaviour whereby, conversion is viewed as a single event that brings a radical change in the orientation of an individual. However, over the years a considerable amount of works on conversion in the sociology of religion flourished. This has resulted in the

formulation of diverse perspectives on conversion. Scholars have argued and emphasised the agency of individual whereby the individual learns to appropriate the roles, norms, values, worldview and acquired a new social identity of the group (Lofland & Stark, 1965; Straus, 1979; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989), and that it can be identified through their speech and reasoning (Snow & Machalek, 1984). Conversion does not happen in isolation but within a broad social, economic, political and historical context where a change in beliefs and practices is influenced and shaped by historical experiences (Ifeka-Moller, 1974; Robinson & Clark, 2003; Masondo, 2015). Therefore, it should be noted that a single theory is not sufficient to explain conversion given the different experiences, time frames and circumstances.

The question of why Nagas converted to Christianity and the nature of conversion has been answered differently by scholars. The varied reasons for conversion show the complex nature of conversion and indicate how a society or individual can react differently to a common phenomenon for different reasons.

In the context of the Nagas, the question of why people converted to Christianity and the nature of conversion has been answered differently by scholars. The varied reasons for conversion show the complex nature of conversion and indicates how a society or individual can react differently to a common phenomenon for different reasons. Eaton (1984) in his study of conversion among the Nagas opined that conversion was intellectual. Conversion for the Nagas operates on how Christian cosmology was made to fit into their belief system, Naga religious cosmology. For Abraham Lotha (2016), Christianity provided opportunities, access to resources, and social mobility through education. Hence, for the Nagas, accepting Christian faith marked a shift from backwardness to modernity. Ketholenuo Mepfhü-o (2016) looked into conversion not just as a change of religion but the effects it has on the socio and cultural life of the Nagas, a change of their lifestyle, which ultimately led to a new construction of a new Christian self that was distinct from the existing Naga self. According to John Thomas (2016), conversion for the Nagas became an act of assertion of their freedom to access 'modernity' and forge a national identity. For theologians like Panger Imchen (1993) and Pongen (2016), the old Naga religious beliefs were seen as a foundation of Christianity and that Naga people being open and sensitive to religious beliefs they cannot be considered as passive but active recipients of Christianity. Vibha Joshi (2012) in her study of healing practices amongst the Angamis

shows that conversion is determined by what is best suited to their needs and that the individuals shift their allegiance in accordance to their personal beliefs and practices. Avitoli Zhimo (2015), in her study of the Sumi Nagas opines that with the Christian message of a promised eternal life and freedom of fear, conversion for the Nagas means freeing themselves from the bondage of fearful spirits and costly ritual. Kanato Chophy (2019) argues that conversion is a continuous negotiation process between the traditional way of life and the idealistic patterns of Christianity. therefore, for the Nagas, conversion to a new religious system provided the Nagas with a body of knowledge to understand the social world and their environment.

The available literatures have enriched one's understanding of conversion that it is not merely a change in one's religious affiliation but a story of negotiations and redefinitions of social, cultural, religious and political life (Mepfhü-o, 2016). However, most of the perspectives on conversion are either confined within the period of 1880s-1960s or deal largely with the appropriation of Christian beliefs. These works are however silent on the status of late converts. When we consider the fact that conversions occurred into the late 20th century and even continues till today, we are also confronted by the fact that these late conversions occurred and are occurring in drastically changed socio-economic and political contexts. The models proposed in the existing literature to explain the reasons for conversion therefore run into problems.

For instance, for the late convert, it is no longer a purely intellectual question when the term *Ukepenuopfü* is in vogue. It is also no longer a problem for the *Kriinamia* to access modernity or education, (given that most of the present *Kriina* adherents and late converts are either retired government employees or still in service). The question remains, why do people convert then? Is it because the Christians are overshadowing them or is there more to it? The following part of the chapter, therefore, will deal with why the 'recalcitrant' *Kriina* adherents are converting focusing on the narratives of the late converts. And it should be noted that they are either late or last convert in their respective clan, *khel* and village.

4.6 Why do people convert? The late convert accounts

4.6.1 The absence of religious specialists and the inability to fulfil ritual

There is a connection between conversion and the inability to fulfil ritual. While it should be clear that the inability to fulfil the ritual is not only because it is expensive or inconvenient. As Theyiehu Rutsa¹⁶, the GB of Kohima village while narrating the reason why his parents got converted to Christianity, puts it, it is also because “*everyone got converted to Christianity and there was no longer anyone to observe or initiate the rituals for us.*” The Anxiety that is associated with the crisis of life is relived through rituals (Malinowski, 1948) and in *Kriina*, (as discussed above in ritual section) in times of life crisis there are rituals which can be performed only by clan members and the religious specialist. So, for Rutsa’s parents, there was none left to observe the ritual called *zha penguo senyü* (ritual observed by relatives or clan members during burial and the following 5 days. N. K Das referred to them as ‘funeral kinship’ (Das, 1993, p. 56) given that all his relatives and clan are Christians. Besides, there was no one to take up the role of *Liva-u* to observe the burial rites. Hence my parents had to convert, which he said was a common phenomenon for the late convert.

Similarly, Shürhuo Yhome¹⁷, a respondent from Kohima village said that he converted in the year 2001 and his parents in 2010. He states:

Me and all my siblings were converted to Christianity before my parents. So, we talked to them and told them that if they die as a *kriinamia* there will be no one to *kenyü* (do the funeral rites) their death and to let a person who is not our relatives or family members to observe the rituals is a shameful thing. And to get buried as *peyo* (a burial without any funeral rites) is unthinkable again. So eventually, they give in and get converted. We invited the Catholic Church Fathers and got them baptised.

Neilakuolie Yiese¹⁸, who converted in 2007 at the age of 45, said he was the last follower of *Tsana* in his grandfather’s lineage and narrated his experience of embracing

¹⁶ Interviewed on 3rd February 2022, he is 64 years old and a Goan Burah from Kohima village.

¹⁷ Yhome is 60 years old and a retired government employee. Interviewed on 15th February 2022, Kohima village.

¹⁸ Yiese is 65 years old, a retired Rural Health Medical Inspector and a former church deacon. Interviewed on 6th February 2022, Kohima village.

Christianity. He said the Christians used to laugh at him for being a *Krüna* adherent, which he said, ‘the irony is they called themselves Christians but use to drink and do not even go to Church’. Seeing the way, the Christians lived their life, he did not have the desire to convert. His wife and daughter converted to Christianity some years before him but their conversion did not pose any challenge being the sole *Krüna* adherent in his family as he was able to observe all the required rituals without the assistance of his wife. There was no question of doubt to convert until his son was born. He said:

when my son was born, as a part of childbirth ritual, I have to take him to one of *Krüna*’s houses for *phere khrü* marking his first time stepping out from the house and to seek blessing. But there was no one I could take my son to since I am the only *Krüna* adherent in my *khel*. So, my neighbour told me to get my son ready to take him to church to seek the church elders’ blessing and which also signifies as a first time stepping out from their house. From that day, I became a *kehoumia* (meaning church goers, use as equivalent to Christian).

A respondent from Mezoma village, Meyakhoü Beyiese¹⁹, who converted in 2003, said there were very few of them who are following *Krüna* and though the rituals are elaborate and complex they still cling on to it. On being asked why she got converted to Christianity, she replied:

My family converted to Christianity when one of my sons passed away. We were not in a position to perform all the death rituals since all our relatives are Christians and there were none among our relatives to observe the rituals called ‘*u se kenyü*’²⁰.

They did not have any other alternatives but ultimately, they have to convert to Christianity for her son’s burial. They asked the Catholic Father to do the funeral rites and for that, her family also had to get converted.

Adou Vikhrie²¹ from Mezoma village, who got converted in 1979, said he was a divorcee for some years till he remarried and for every ritual he observed he has to ask his

¹⁹ Meyakhoü is a farmer. Interviewed on 17th February 2022, Mezoma village.

²⁰ The funeral rites initiated by a person or few people, ‘funeral kinship’.

²¹ Vikhrie is a retired government employee and a church deacon. Interviewed on 16th February 2022.

neighbour's daughter to come and do the *kijie* for him which he thinks is inconvenient for her as well. Eventually, he decided to get converted.

In the case of Rutsa, Yhome, Yiese, Beyiese and Vikhrie their conversions in the first place were not to do with Christian belief (McGuire, 2012). Despite the decreasing number of *Kriina* adherents over the years, they were determined to hold on to *Kriina* until they were faced with a life crisis situation which appeared to be a turning point for them (Stark & Lofland, 1965). *Kriina* being a ritualist religion, rites and rituals serve as a means to deal with the life crisis which will relieve anxiety and also reaffirm cohesion and social solidarity of the group (Malinowski, 1948). However, the presence of few *Kriina* adherent or sometime, being the sole *Kriinamia* and the inability to fulfil the rites because there was no one to initiate the rituals made them took the ultimate decision to convert. In the case of Rutsa, Yhome and Beyiese, it was associated with the fear of burying without funeral rites, For Vikhrie, it was the case of the absence of a woman to initiate the ritual, and for Yiese, it was the recruitment of his child into society without the elder's blessing. Their conversion is related to the anxiety if they fail to observe the rituals properly in the absence of religious specialist (Malinowski, 1948).

4.6.2 Conversion in search of a common meaning system

Ketsulhoulie Yhome²² from Kohima village, converted in 1997, narrated that his family converted to Christianity as they alone cannot remain *tsanamia*²³ when everyone in the village had converted to Christianity. On being asked why he got converted, if he still wishes to remain a *tsanamia*, and if he can do the rituals with his family? He replied,

No, it doesn't work like that. I have to discuss the meaning of the rituals and when to observe the *penie* days with my other fellow *tsanamia*. If there is no one to discuss the *nanyü* (rituals) meanings with other *tsanamia*, there is no point of me and my family following *Tsana*. So, in my later stage of being a *tsanamia* there was no joy and I find it meaningless to carry on the *Tsana*.

²² Yhome is 68 years old and a retired government employee. Interviewed on 15th February 2022, Kohima Village.

²³ The respondents from Kohima Village prefers to use *Tsana* over *Kriina*.

A similar narrative is shared by Evül Kiso²⁴ from Viswema village. It was in 2021, that he got converted along with his wife. He said, “there are very few *Krüna* and there may come a time when I will be the only *Krüna* so before that happens, I have decided to convert to Christianity. If there are few *Krünamia*, it is difficult to follow all the rituals and chances are there to sometimes mistakenly skip some ritual steps.”

In the case of Yhome and Kiso, the Durkheimian notion of collective act of worship which is integral to the continuity and existence of *Krüna* becomes evident (Durkheim, 1912). Karlsson (2000) discusses how Christianity provided the Rabhas with a sense of security and belonging as they faced the loss of their forest. In contrast, the situation among the Angami is different. However, with the increasing number of Christians in their community, *Krüna* adherents are finding it increasingly difficult to relate their traditional beliefs to the community, as the majority is now Christian. In this context, Christianity offers them a new sense of belonging. To summarize, their conversion to Christianity can be understood as a response to the growing disconnection between their religious beliefs and the community—an essential factor for maintaining a meaningful religious life. For these individuals, sharing a common belief system with the community seems to be the primary motivation for conversion.

4.6.3 Conversion, education and ritual initiation

Education and Christianity went hand in hand and their relationship is seen mainly in the line of education as an agent to induce the growth of Christianity. With the leverages one gets from education, Christianity appears to be appealing (Lotha, 2016). However, for a person like Pezalhoulie Hiekha²⁵ from Khonoma village, who got converted in 2012, there is a different story of why in the midst of his quest for education he had to convert to Christianity. On being asked why he got converted to Christianity, he replied that he stayed in Kohima for his studies and there were times when his exams collided with family rituals and other festivals. So, if he could not make it on time, he and his brothers would have to observe the ritual especially the ritualistic purification of body after their exams got over. Sometimes, his family who resided in the village would wait for them to proceed with

²⁴ Kiso is 67 years old and a retired government employee. Interviewed on 12th January 2023, Viswema village.

²⁵ Hiekha is 39 years old. He is 12 standards passed and a farmer. Interviewed on 25th February 2021, Khonoma village

certain rituals, which in turn made his family lag behind in their agricultural work. He decided to convert to Christianity with the hope and intention that his absence will not be an impediment to his parents' religious activities, at the same time he will not feel the burden with the thought of going home for the rituals. And this was the case for many people who were pursuing their studies outside the village, Hiekha said. What can be constructed from Hiekha's narration is that, education does not serve as an attraction for him to convert neither Christianity is not seen as a means to access education which provides opportunities, access resources, social mobility, etc., but only because it is coming in the way of his religious activities. The compulsion of observing the *gennas* in a given time within the premises of the village has become unfeasible for him because of his location and studies. While Christianity, unlike *Krüna*, has given him the possibility to follow a religion without such restrictive *gennas* and a religion to practice under any circumstances irrespective of his distant location.

4.6.4 Conversion and women experiences

In the course of analysing the dynamics of conversion, the question of whether woman experience conversion differently from men and to what extent are women's experiences distorted, denigrated or denied by any patriarchal requirements of the conversion stereotype (Rambo, 1993) merits discussion.

In *Krüna* religion, it is taboo for unmarried women to grow their hair. A young unmarried girl with shaven head is a sign of purity but for an older unmarried woman, a shaven head is associated with shame, an unspoken indication of being undesirable. Therefore, converting to Christianity became a saving grace for most of the Angami unmarried women though their action was not without opposition from the *Krünamia*. Casielie Casavi from Mezoma village²⁶, who converted in 1987, said that the day he converted he took his sister with him and went to church. His parents vehemently opposed his decision. On being asked why he took his sister along with him, he replied, his sister has reach marriageable age and to continue donning on a shaven head at her age, it is only reasonable of him and as a responsible brother to let her convert with him so that she can start growing her hair without restriction. A shaven head which is glorified but at the same time looked upon

²⁶ Casavi is 54 years old. A government servant and a former pastor. Interviewed on 7th October 2020, Mezoma village.

with shame has definitely put unsurmountable social and psychological pressure to a woman. However, even after conversion the amount of opposition and being ridiculed in the name, that it is a taboo for an unmarried to grow her hair, a woman whether convert or non-convert is bound to be judged under the gaze of a patriarchal setup.

Rüükhono Sirie²⁷ and her late husband got converted in 2011, one of the last *Kriinamia* in Mezoma village. Her children converted before her and her husband, two of her daughters even got married in Christian matrimonial ceremony before her conversion. She revealed her desire to get converted to Christianity and she used to celebrate all the Christian festivals with her converted children. But she could not make the final decision and go against the wish of her husband because of his position. She said “my husband needs my assistance to initiate the *kijie* whenever he observed any ritual” while was also stating that it was a matter of pride for him to carry on the religion in the midst of the majority Christians. She received baptism in 2014, and though she does not fully understand the meaning of baptism, she testified her baptism had brought her a sense of inner peace. Despite her wish to convert, her position of being a woman has constrained her to make the decision.

²⁷ Sirie is 57 years old and a farmer. Interviewed on 26th April 2020, Mezoma village.



Image 4.8: Rüükhono Sirie, one of the last converts in Mezoma village.

Source: Fieldwork, Mezoma village

On the other hand, Sashevinu Toso²⁸, 27 years old who got converted in 2019, confidently confessed her desire to continue as *Krünamia*. In her words, “I want to continue following *Krüna* and support my *Krüna* parents but my hands are tight to do anything because I am a woman and its easier for society to taunt a woman than a man.” She further confessed that she merely follows the Christian practises just for the sake of being a Christian and feels that Christianity is not for her but still she accepted her fate sounding defeated.

The accounts of Sirie and Toso appear to be in a contradiction but not really different from each other. Sirie’s wish to convert and Toso's wanting to remain a *Krüna*, but their position of being a woman has curtailed them to decide for themselves. For Sirie, it was a case of conversion decided by the man in the household while for Toso, conversion was influenced not by her family but a societal pressure. It is evident from their narratives that the experience of women on conversion is hugely determined by the gender relation.

The above given narratives have shown that conversion for the late convert is in one way or the other related to ritual: the absence of clan members and religious specialists to

²⁸ Toso did her masters in commerce and a Hindi teacher by profession. Interviewed on 11th January 2023, Viswema village.

initiate ritual because everyone has converted to Christianity, the inability to observed ritual in a given time, or the requirement of the wife to initiate ritual for her husband. However, there are also people who converted because Christianity has given them spiritual and psychological satisfaction and for some, access to goods.

4.6.5 Conversion and mystical encounter

Veletol Khanuo from Viswema village²⁹, 75 years old who converted in 2021 after encountering with a peculiar dream he dreamt, said that he was a loyal follower of *Krūna* and took a vow with his late wife that if they convert to Christianity they will convert together, if not they both will remain as *Krūnamia*. But in 2021 he had a dream and narrates “in my dream I was walking through an endless fine constructed path which suddenly in a blink of an eye the path disappeared. I got confused and told myself how such a thing can happen and then I heard a voice telling me to pray to my *Kepenuopfū*. I told myself how I can pray if I am not a Christian. I became restless and not at peace. Then the person, a pioneer of the Christian Revival Church Viswema appeared and prayed for me. The next morning, I woke up and was thinking, I cannot be in this situation anymore, I have to get converted to *kehoumia*”. On being asked why he cannot pray as a *Krūnamia*, he replied, “it is the Christian *Kepenuopfū* who spoke to me in my dream and told me to pray because what kind of prayer shall I pray as a *Krūnamia*”. He said it has been two years since his conversion and he is still learning how to pray. He testifies that though he is illiterate and cannot read the Bible he goes to church every Sunday and listens to the sermons of pastor and deacons and receives their prayers.

²⁹ Khanuo is 75 years old and a farmer. Interviewed on 12th January 2023, Viswema village.



Image 4.9: Veletol Khanuo

Source: Fieldwork, Viswema village

Lavikho Kitshü from Mezoma village³⁰, 85 years old who got converted in 1977, considers himself a loyal adherent of *Kriina* till he has been converted to Christianity because of continual sickness of his children. He said when one of his children got sick, *Ukepenuopfü* spoke to him in his dream, told him to take his children and go to church. So, the next Sunday he took his family and went to church. After few days of his conversion, he got sick and has to undergo a surgery. He was ridiculed by the *Kriinamia* that his sickness was the outcome of abandoning *Kriina*. But instead, he said he found strength and hope in being a Christian and said “I took this sickness as a way of *Ukepenuopfü* speaking to me”. He got baptism in 1978 and later on he served as the church pastor for twelve years.

The accounts of Khanuo and Kitshü very closely leaned towards what Lofland and Skonovd called as mystical conversion (cited in Snow & Machalak, 1984). It involves a powerful, mystical and spiritual forces which is characterised by a brief critical period prior to conversion, intense affect, and a change in belief that results in participation in the ritual and organisation activities of a religion. For Khanuo, despite his initial intention not

³⁰ Kitshü is a retired government teacher and a former pastor. Interviewed on 21st January 2023, Mezoma village.

to convert, and Kitshü in the midst of a health crisis, a mystical encounter has brought about a sudden and dramatic change in their beliefs and psychological make-up (ibid.).

4.6.6 Conversion as a useful supplement: The case of reconversion

Another respondent from Viswema village, Kruvil Kikhi³¹ and his wife are adherents of *Krüna* while all his children have converted to Christianity. He said that some years back he was also converted to Christianity when the Catholic church handed out rations such as, rice, flour and cooking oil, on every Sunday for their attendance in church. But after a while the leverage that comes with their attendance in church was stopped. So, he and his family went back to *Krüna*. The nature of Kikhi's conversion is similar to what Nock (1993) pointed out in his distinction between conversion and adhesion. According to Nock (Nock, 1993, p. 6-7), in adhesion there is possibility of participating in religious groups and rituals without assuming a new way of life. Unlike conversion where there is re-orientation of the soul, adhesion involves the acceptance of new religions as 'useful supplements and not as substitutes'. Similarly, for Kikhi, his involvement in church is not an outcome of a change in his belief but instead perceived it as a 'useful supplement'. Kikhi as an adhesionist has 'a foot on each side of the fence' (ibid.).

The question of why people convert, and whether community-based indigenous religions can provide existential meaning in today's modern, rationalized world, is a complex issue. Scholars such as Lotha (2016) and Thomas (2016) argue that conversion among the Nagas is a means of accessing modernity. However, Eaton (1984) suggests that conversion is not about modernity, but rather a cognitive process—one where Christian belief align with traditional cosmology. Yet, from the perspective of late converts, conversion is no longer about modernity or cognition, especially since many of them are now government employees and the use of the term *Ukepenuopfü* instead of *terhuomia* by the *Krüna* adherents is in vogue. Conversion is an outcome of expensive ritual practices (Zhimo, 2015) but it was not the case for the late convert. This raises the question of whether they are converting because their indigenous religion no longer holds relevance, or whether there is a deeper 'internal conversion,' as Geertz suggested (Geertz, 1973). With the 'disenchantment' of the world, a new formalised religion stepped in to bridge the distance between man and the sacred (cited in Geertz, 1973, p.185). However, for the late convert,

³¹ Kikhi is a government employee and a *Krüna* adherent. He called himself an indigenous faith believer. Interviewed on 12th March 2021, Mezoma village.

the decision is not about choosing a more rationalized or systematic religion because their indigenous beliefs no longer make sense. There is also no evidence of internal conversion in the sense of formalizing their religious practices. Instead, the driving factor is the decline in Krüna adherents, leading to a lack of individuals who can perform essential rituals, especially those associated with death. This absence of ritual practitioners causes anxiety, as death rites are vital for the community. In *Krüna* religion, not just anyone can serve as the village priest or perform funeral rites; these roles are assigned to specific clans. In Kohima village, for example, the *Livau* (the person who initiates the funeral rites) traditionally comes from the Tsiaramia clan. However, with the conversion of the entire Tsiaramia clan, there is no one left to conduct these death rituals. To bury the dead without these rituals is unthinkable, which forces individuals in such situations to convert to Christianity. Christianity provided the late convert with a sense of security and belonging in the face of anxiety.

4.7 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has shown the complexity of ritual practices that comprised the Angami indigenous religion or *Krüna* which has to be observed diligently and with utmost care in every phase of life. This chapter has further argued that understanding the ritual intricacies is imperative for a better understanding of conversion dynamics. On the other hand, narratives of the late converts have shown the complexity of *Krüna* religion and that these rituals cannot be observed by an individual alone but have to be observed in alliance with the clan member or village. Therefore, the conversion of the majority of the villagers to Christianity put a strain upon the *Krüna* adherents to continue their ritual practices which is pertinent for them to make sense of their reality.

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