

## CHAPTER 5

### RELIGIOUS ADAPTATION AND ASSERTION OF INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

#### 5.1 Introduction

On January 7, 2018, the Indian national daily, The Indian Express<sup>1</sup>, carried a news article titled “In Christian Nagaland, indigenous religion of pre-Christian Nagas withstands test of time” which covered the story of the practitioners of Angami indigenous religion or *Krüna* as they identify themselves. Yose Chaya, one of the most prominent and influential leaders among the depleting practitioners of the indigenous religion whom we have also encountered in the previous chapters, was pictured attired in the traditional kilt with a white cloth draping down his left shoulder, while the colourful necklaces, armband, headband, and hornbill feathers added to the picturesque image as the 73-year-old Yose Chaya stood magnificently holding a spear in his right hand. Behind him, in the background, was a traditional house with the conspicuous ‘house-horns’ and to his side was a *badze*, a traditional resting place made of stone blocks. And yet, there was no doubt that the ‘traditional image’ captured in the still frame of the camera is no longer ‘traditional’ in its pristine form. Whether it is the sighting of a pink hoodie in the background or the fact that Yose Chaya was pictured wearing sandals, evidently the times and context in which adherents of the indigenous religion practiced their religion has changed. However, if the lenses are changed to accommodate different perspectives, these evidence of change also direct attention to resilience and adaptation of a minority religious group, a fact that formed the central focus of the news article.

When interviewed, Yosa Chaya stated that there were about 50 families in Viswema village who still follow the ‘original’ religion of the Nagas. Yosa Chaya was deliberate in his emphasis on the indigenous religion as the original religion and was quoted as stating, “what is ours is ours. I am a Naga. I am not a Christian or a Hindu.” Such a statement brings into focus many crucial questions. Christianity is not only the dominant religion among the Nagas today but it is also considered to be an integral aspect of the very articulation of Naga identity. In fact, the beginnings of the Naga political consciousness

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<sup>1</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/nagaland/in-christian-nagaland-indigenous-religion-of-pre-christian-nagas-withstand-test-of-time-5010777/>

were closely intertwined with the spread of the Christian consciousness. Against this backdrop, Yosa Chaya's claim of indigenous religion being the 'original' religion of the Nagas runs counter to one of the deeply entrenched narratives of Naga identity. It also raises critical questions concerning representations of 'Naga' and even tribality. In Yosa Chaya's worldview, Christianity is a 'foreign' religion and not compatible with Naga culture and therefore only adherents of the indigenous religion are 'truly' Naga. Such views are not popular in a state where more than 90 percent of the population are Christians. It is also one of the primary reasons why the indigenous religion is viewed with suspicion by church leaders.

It is also interesting that Yosa Chaya posited the indigenous religion as distinct not only from Christianity but also from Hinduism. It reflects the lines on which religious identities are polarised and the ways in which notions of ethnicity, political identity, and religious identity are often conflated. One of the major concerns that is often flagged against the practice and promotion of indigenous religion is their alleged connection with the Hindu right wing. In the context of the 'Christian state' of Nagaland, such allegations are viewed as grave concerns. Thus, the challenge facing the indigenous religion is not only of carving a distinct identity from Christianity but also resisting the absorption into the general Hindu fold. There is limited space within which *Krüna* adherents can assert their religious identity. This chapter dwells on some of these pertinent issues by exploring the ways in which *Krünamia* or adherents of the indigenous religion adapt with the socio-economic and political changes in contemporary Nagaland.

Religion as an integral part of the society does not remain static, but adapts with the changing trend to survive. In the contemporary society of religious pluralism, one of the concerns of sociologist is not to ask the question of whether a society is becoming less religious but rather asks what new forms, religion is taking (Robert and Yamane, 2012). Agyemang and Awuah-Nyamekye (2018) makes a differentiation between 'orthodox' African traditional religion and the new religious movements; the former characterised by no founders and missionaries and the latter with founders and missionary. In the context of the Angami Nagas, *Krüna* which falls into the former category faced the challenges brought about by Christianity and urbanization. This chapter highlights some of these challenges and explore the ways in which *Krüna* has adapted to changes. As the *Krüna* seek to maintain their own separate identity and keep their religious practices relevant,

they are also compelled to negotiate with waves of changes that attended Naga society, more specifically the Christianisation of the Nagas and the Naga political movement for sovereignty. Moreover, the social and cultural contexts in which *Krüna* adherents must practice their religion in contemporary Naga society is radically different from the traditional context which also necessitates creative adjustments, compromise, and adaptation of their beliefs and practices. This chapter as a whole deal with what the *Krüna* adherents are doing to keep their religion relevant meanwhile to maintain a separate identity.

## **5.2 Challenges and adaptation**

The unswerving growth of Christianity is slowly overshadowing *Krüna*, reducing its adherent to a countable number, making it difficult for *Krüna* adherents to observe their religious practices as a community. Besides, the impact of urbanisation where its adherents venturing out of the village and engaged in modern profession and the quest in western formal education are some of the casual factor and challenges faced by *Krüna* for its continuous existence. As discussed in chapter 2, the spatial unit of the village is central to the traditional *Krüna* cosmological worldview. However, the changed socio-economic context has made it impossible to maintain and observe the village as a ritual unit.

Lesley Stevens (1991) explained the changes in the traditional religious practices of Tanzania. He highlighted three categories, 1) those practices which are extinct in the village 2) those which are still intact and performed much as they were in the past 3) those which are mixed or syncretised. In the first category, he mentioned about a communal sacrifice where all the clan gathered and gives offering to the clan head. However, this ritual has declined due to the impact of the church and eventually led to the disappearance of the clan or lineage group as a ritual congregation. Though there were few elders who continued but it has become a privatized ritual. In the challenges faced by the African traditional religion, Agyemang and Nyamekye (2018) also mentioned about the shrines which took centre stage in traditional Akan worship but are now completely wiped out either for the lack of priests to attend to the gods or worshippers to assist the priest in worship. Likewise, the same phenomenon has been noticed within *Krüna*. As already discussed in the previous chapter, since the whole clan of ‘the first sower’ as well as ‘the reaper’ have become Christians, the present *Krüna* adherent initiate the ritual individually or within the family circle. This communal ritual though not completely wiped off but has

become a private family ritual. There are many religious practices which are still in practice but have been drastically altered when in need depending on the circumstances.

Incorporation of the new member has to be done within the premises of the village gate, which poses a challenge for the young *Krüna* adherent who ventured out of the village and are engaged in modern profession. This was evident in the case of Lozhoho Khanuo<sup>2</sup> who narrated the observation of birth ritual for his twins. Since, he and his family resided in Kohima town, it was not possible for him at the moment of the birth of his new born infants to take his wife and children to Viswema village to observe the birth rituals. Therefore, around twenty days after the birth of his new born babies, he took them to the village and did the necessary birth rituals. He said that since most of the family in his neighbourhood has converted to Christianity it was a Christian young girl who carried his child to a family for the ritual of ‘first visit’ to a relative house signifying the incorporation of new member to the clan. Here was an instance of rendering the birth ritual flexible to accommodate the changed circumstances.

*Sekrenyi* being considered as an important festival for the male members to sanctify their *phou* (body and soul) Neizochonü Chaya<sup>3</sup>, 90 years old, though all her three sons have been converted to Christianity, she wakes up at dawn and performed the ritual *kijie* before the sun has risen and commute with anyone. However, for a person who is employed and working at a distance away from the village, it is not convenient since they have to be there at home before the ritual *kijie*. So, for a family like Yose’s family who have children employed in government service accommodations have to be made for the rituals to be applicable to their family. On 21<sup>st</sup> December 2021<sup>4</sup>, the *sekrenyi* festival is to be started with the ritual *kijie*. It has been observed that Yose Chaya’s sons who both are government employees are coming that day itself. So, as per the requirement of customs, they had to reach Viswema village before the sun sets for the mother to perform *kijie* ritual. Kethosezo and Vizhodi (the two sons of Yose) reached their home at around 3:00 pm, some minutes away before the sunset. Upon reaching their home, the mother starts the preparation of

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<sup>2</sup> Lozhoho Khanuo is a PGT Hindi teacher. He is 38 years old and an adherent of *Krüna*. Interviewed on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2023, Viswema village.

<sup>3</sup> Neizochonü Chaya is around 90 years old. An adherent of *Krüna* and a farmer. Interviewed on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2023, Viswema village.

<sup>4</sup> Field data.

*kijie* right away and the father and his two sons were able to observe *sekre* on the third day of the festival. While, for a person like Nothupi Kiso<sup>5</sup>, the caretaker of Viswema *khari*, who is the sole *Krünamia* in his family after his children got converted around ten years back and it's been three years since his wife also got converted, is left with all the responsibility to handle the family's associated rituals. On being asked about the observation of *sekre* rituals, it came to light that it's been three years he has not observed *sekre* for which he justified that it is not *kenyü* if he does not wish to observe *sekre* being a *Krünamia*. It is apparent that there is a continuing adjustment for the applicability of rituals accordingly.

For the Angamis, it is taboo for a woman to grow her hair before marriage. So, when Yose Chaya<sup>6</sup> got married to a Christian woman, she was made to undergo the procedures of *Krüna* marriage ritual. Unlike the *Krüna* unmarried woman with a shaven bald head, it is not a taboo for a Christian unmarried woman to grow her hair long. Therefore, when Yose's wife got married to him, she was made to shave a few strands of her hair behind one of her ears in order to fulfil the ritual of a *Krüna* marriage. The ritual was observed as a token and one can see that some changes have been made to accommodate into the procedure of traditional marriage. Meanwhile, in the recent times, it has become a challenging task for the young adherents to choose their life partner of the same religion. For which, the option for a young *Krünamia* like Lozoho Khanuo has to choose either *nei-keri* (eloped) or convert to his spouse religion, which he ultimately chooses the former. He said that since his wife is a Christian, their marriage cannot be officialised through a traditional *Krüna* marriage. Therefore, after some days of his wife being to his home, he invited the *Krüna* elders from Viswema village to seek their blessing. The elders came and did the ritual of *zu kenyie* (the act of touching forehead and chest with *zu* and taking a sip) to sanctify the marital bond and seek blessing in the name of *Ukepenuopfü*. After which he gave a small feast to his relatives and clan members.

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<sup>5</sup> Nothupi Kiso is 55 years old and a *Krüna* adherent, he is the village gate keeper. Interviewed on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2023, Viswema village.

<sup>6</sup> Yose Chaya is 76 years old and an adherent of *Krüna*. He is a retired government employee. Viswema village, interviewed on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021.

### 5.2.1 A shift in cosmology

One of the areas where the *Krüna* adherents are adapting with the contemporary changes is a shift in cosmology. As discussed in chapter 2, *terhuomia* is a generic term constitutive of the supreme being, ancestral spirits, known and unknown spirits. And their everyday lives revolve around the regular appeasing of *terhuomia* who are believed to reside in stones, trees, deep jungles and capable of incurring misfortune to the community if being provoked. However, the missionaries in their ignorance regarded *terhuomia* as ‘evil’ or ‘satan’ (Hutton, 1969, p. 180) and in their attempt to convert the Angami, they translated the concept of *Ukepenuopfü* as equivalent to the Christian God (Eaton, 1984). The concept of *Ukepenuopfü* is used exhaustively by both the Christians and the *Krüna* adherents. It has been observed that the present *Krüna* adherents are strongly influenced by the Christian’s idea of monotheism and this same phenomenon has been recorded by Longkumer among the Heraka followers to reform their religion (Longkumer, 2010).

This phenomenon is leaning towards the theoretical explanation given by Horton (1975). According to Horton, their exposure to a wider world and engaging in long distance trade had challenged their microcosm (lesser spirits) explanation of event, hence resulting in less attention paid to the spirits while inclining towards macrocosm (Supreme Being). Likewise, for the *Krüna* adherents, the usage of *Ukepenuopfü*, Supreme Being, is seen to be more prevalent while the term *terhuomia* is found to be taking a back seat. This could be the influence of Christianity and its belief in one Single God. And their belief in *Ukepenuopfü*’s intervention in their daily lives is highlighted especially in times of ritual or *genna* days and sickness (rituals are done to repel *terhuomia*). In the news article referred to in the opening paragraph of this chapter, Yose Chaya is recorded as beginning his day with a prayer. While Yose Chaya sets the ‘simple prayer’ in contradistinction to the elaborate Christian prayers, it is interesting to note that he begins his day with a prayer to God. Yose Chaya also referred to God as *Ukepenuopfü*, the same term used and popularized by the Christians.

Lozhoho Khanuo who is a government employee and does not reside in the village, also stated that he prayed to *Ukepenuopfü* and believed that even though he could not observe the rituals, *Ukepenuopfü* will take care of him wherever he goes as long as he is mindful of his actions. This idea of *Ukepenuopfü* being a personal God who understands daily struggles and can be prayed to is in essence a very Christian idea. In fact, the inclination

towards a monotheistic God as distinct from the many spirits that inhabit the traditional cosmological world represents a significant alteration of belief. And for Vikeril Toso<sup>7</sup>, the *kemevo khopie* (basket lifter or helper of *kemevo*) of Viswema village, said *Ukepenuopfü* is the creator of everything while *terhuomia* is satan, we get sick if we get afflicted by *terhuomia*. He further explained that at one time when he got sick, he was told ‘*Ukepenuopfü is not with you, seek Kepenuopfü*’. So, he did ritual and ask *Ukepenuopfü* to heal him. Illness is believed to be the handiwork of *terhuomia* and rituals are done to *terhuomia* depending on the nature of the ailment (discussed in chapter 2). However, for the present Krünamia they seek *Ukepenuopfü*. Vekehele Chaya,<sup>8</sup> a *Krüna* adherent, recounts of a time when she got sick and since there is no diviner in Viswema village or neighbouring village to consult, she visited Pudiniho Kweho, a faith healer in Viswema village. She said, the faith healer praying for her, advised her to go and give away a chicken. As told, she took a chicken outside the village gate, loosen it and said *mha kesuoko khawa di Ukepenuopfü ki mha kevi chalie teho* (abandon the bad things and asked good things from *Ukepenuopfü*). She testified, she recovered after the faith healer prayed for her and she did what he advised her to do.

When it comes to their belief in the existence of an afterlife, their belief is leaning towards the Christian concept of heaven and hell. Vise Sirie<sup>9</sup> said that “in *Krüna* there is no such belief in the existence of heaven or paradise but we only believe that if we die our soul will become a star or pass through the seven existences”. On the other hand, an adherent of *Krüna*, Yose Chaya<sup>10</sup> professed his belief in the existence of heaven and hell, according to him people who live a treacherous life will go to hell and an honest person will go to heaven. This belief seems to be an additional element to his faith or rather the influence of Christianity. The belief in the existence of heaven in Angami eschatology is also mentioned by Hutton, the distinction between the sheep and the goats<sup>11</sup>, for whereas the former goes

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<sup>7</sup> Vikeril Toso is 68 years old. He is a follower of *Krüna* and is currently the *kemevo khopie*. He is also a retired government employee. Interviewed on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2023, Viswema village.

<sup>8</sup> Vekehele Chaya is 61 years old and a follower of *Krüna*. She is a farmer. Interviewed on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2023, Viswema Village.

<sup>9</sup> Vise Sirie is 65 years old. He got converted at around 16 years old. Interviewed on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020, Mezoma Village

<sup>10</sup> Yose Chaya, Viswema village, a follower of *Krüna*. Interviewed on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Similar to the parable of sheep and goat with the second coming of Christ in the book of the gospel Matthew 25: 31-33. Hutton’s monograph was written by the time Christianity has already set in among the Angamis, therefore, the narrative on sheep and goat in Angami eschatology could be an influence of

to a heaven located somewhere in the sky, to dwell with *Ukepenuopfü*, the latter go down beneath the earth, where they pass through seven existences (Hutton, 1969, p. 184). However, in Angami belief, there is no concept of heaven and hell although they believe that when a good man dies, his soul will ascend up the sky and become star and those who could not, will have to pass through the seven existences till they turn to a mere bone and stack up on the wall. It is apparent that Christian belief systems are playing a substantial role in understanding and reorganizing the cosmological world of the *Krüna* adherents.

### **5.3 To be a Naga is to be a *Krünamia*: Negotiating with the Naga political identity**

Perhaps, the single most important event that shaped, and continues to inform, the political history of the Nagas is the Naga movement for sovereignty. The early beginnings of the movement for an independent Naga nation were made toward the close of the colonial rule which escalated into a full-blown military conflict in the 1950s when the government of India attempted to suppress the movement through her armed forces. While the formation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 was sought to be a ‘peaceful’ resolution of the conflict, Naga nationalist decried statehood as a betrayal and a compromise to their demands for sovereignty. The long-drawn Naga movement has been attended by many failed attempts at negotiations including the controversial Shillong Accord in 1975, Ceasefire agreement in 1997, and the more recent Framework Agreement in 2015. And yet, the Naga political issue remains unresolved. It is popularly referred to as the longest-running insurgency in the world. It is therefore a little surprise that much scholarly work on the Nagas has focused on this political history. It may even be stated that no academic study on the Nagas can escape a reference to the Naga movement. A case in point is a recent book by Jelle J.P. Wouter, *In the Shadows of Naga Insurgency* (2018), which argued that the contemporary political and social scene in Nagaland is shaped by and unfolds under the shadow of the Naga movement. Similarly, Dolly Kikon and Duncan McDuie-Ra’s ethnographic study of Dimapur has also shown that the process of urbanization in Nagaland cannot be understood in separation from the long history of violence that characterized Naga political history (Kikon & Mcduie-Ra, 2021).

The brief foray into Naga political history is felt necessary to argue the point that the political history of the Naga movement continues to shape the contemporary social,

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Christianity, since this narration on belief is not found in *Krüna*.



cultural, and political landscape of the Nagas. It is in this context that one may also approach *Krünamia's* claim on the Naga identity. The statement of Yose Chaya alluded to in the opening paragraph of this chapter/section raises critical questions of identity and representation that are worth analysing. Against the backdrop of the broader arguments presented in this study, particularly in chapter 4, the very fact of *Krünamia* staking claim on the Naga identity calls for closer introspection. As argued and shown in chapter 4, the ritual unit of *Krüna* is the village and in that sense, *Krüna's* ritualistic imagination does not transcend the village. Therefore, the implicit and sometimes explicit assertion of *Krüna* as 'Naga religion' is a new articulation that is very much informed by the Naga movement for sovereignty. It may be seen as an attempt of the *Krünamia* to negotiate with the political reality of the Nagas as well as an effort of the *Krünamia* to stay relevant in a changed political context. However, the claim of *Krünamia* as 'authentic' Naga also hints at larger contestations over the question of 'who is a Naga?' or what is the identifier of being Naga?

Most studies on the formation of the Naga political identity have highlighted the indispensable role of Christianity in shaping and giving form to this identity. The pioneers of the Naga movement were mostly mission-school educated while Naga identity also came to be increasingly asserted in opposition to the mainstream Indian religions of Hindu and Muslim. In fact, the Naga movement itself came to be seen as a Christian movement embodied in the famous slogan, 'Nagaland for Christ'. Scholars therefore see the arrival of Baptist Christianity to the Naga Hills as a significant historical marker in the formation of the Naga political identity. Kanato Chophy's recent work, *Christianity and Politics in Tribal India* (2021) show the parallel growth of Baptist Christianity and the Naga movement with a close overlap between missionaries and revolutionary leaders. In Chophy's dense narrative, the story of the Naga movement cannot be understood in separation from the story of Baptist Christianity. Chophy, in fact, goes so far as to reimagine the political, social, and cultural landscape of the Nagas across state and national borders through the lens of Baptist Christianity, what he provocatively termed the Baptist highlands. In some sense, Chophy's take on the collation of Christianity with Naga identity is not a novel one although his rich ethnographic study is unparalleled. The standard historical works on the Nagas often assume these two identities to be the same thing. However, studies have also shown that the equation of Christianity with Naga identity glosses over the numerous cases of conflicts between the early Christian converts and the adherents of the 'traditional' religion.

John Thomas (2016) has particularly taken issue with the unproblematic meshing of Christianity with Naga culture and identity. In his historical study of the Christianisation of the Nagas, Thomas drew a line of distinction between the Naga ‘cultural self’ and the ‘religious self’, the former representing the ‘traditional culture’ and the latter representing Christianity. Drawing attention to the conflicts that defined the early years of contact between the Christian missionaries and the practitioners of the traditional religion, Thomas argued that Baptist Christianity imposed a new religious and cultural self with a different worldview and religious consciousness. Thomas further argued that the Naga movement that began with the claims of ‘cultural uniqueness’ was forced to negotiate with the increasing popularity and dominance of Christianity. The political slogan ‘Nagaland for Christ’ is thus seen as an instance of the Naga movement being subsumed by the religious movement. Thomas raises a very critical point, that Naga identity and Christianity are separate entities.

In light of the discussions above, how do *Krüna* adherents negotiate their sense of identity? In other words, how do *Krüna* adherents view the collation of Christianity and Naga identity? Against the backdrop of the general trend to see Christianity as an integral component of Naga political identity, as evident in the Naga nationalist slogan ‘Nagaland for Christ’, how do *Krüna* adherents resist dominant narratives to articulate their religious identity?

#### **5.4 Resisting conversion**

Being wary of *Krüna*'s fate that it may cease to exist someday if everyone gets converted to Christianity, the few remnant *Krüna* adherents like Kruvil Kikhi<sup>12</sup> still refuse to give in and cling on to *Krüna* with the hope of keeping it alive. He stated, “if *Krüna* cease to exist we will lose our tradition and culture that has been passed down to us by our forefather.” *Krüna* being intertwined to the festivals and agricultural practices, so, for people like Kikhi, the disappearance of the *Krüna* also means a dead end to the cultural practices associated to it, which in a way depicted that those traditional elements have the ability to exist only within the arena of *Krüna*. There is a clear insistence on the intricate connection of *Krüna* and the idea of being Naga. Such articulations are of course not novel. The

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

colonial ethnographers such as Hutton (1969), Mills (1926), Haimendorf (1939), and later Elwin (1959) were fierce critique of Christian missions on the grounds that Christianity represented an alien culture that would ultimately destroy the authentic Naga culture. The monographs on various Naga tribes by Hutton and Mills, which became classic ethnographic texts were directly motivated by the perceived threat of the growing influence of Christianity among the Nagas. Haimendorf more out-rightly declared that a converted Naga ‘ceases to be a real Naga’ (Haimendorf, 1939). Elwin was similarly very critical of the ‘harmful’ effects of Christian missions and during his stint as the advisor of tribal affairs in post-colonial India, sought to curb mission activities among the tribes. For these ethnographers, religion was a central component of Naga identity and the abandonment of the indigenous religion was seen as an abandonment of Naga identity. Though not necessarily influenced by the views of the colonial ethnographers, the views expressed by Kruvil Kikhi and many others also adopt a similar viewpoint. They see indigenous religion as integral to the assertion of Naga-ness.

Similarly, Yose Chaya also openly asserted that Christianity is no doubt a good religion but it is not for the Nagas. Singing the hymn ‘only believe, only believe, all the things will be possible’, Yose said this kind of hymn has tricked the Nagas given that the Nagas are now only fighting among themselves and that Christianity is just a *kekramia* politics. He stated:

If I wish to convert, I could have converted while I was young but I do not have the urge to embrace someone’s religion when I already have my own. *Ukepenuopfü* has given Christianity to *kekramia* (white people or foreigner) and *Krüna* to the Nagas so, converting to Christianity only depicts my poor faith in my *Kepenuopfü*.

On asking if a convert Naga can be still considered a Naga given that eight of his children are Christian, Chaya replied “a Naga becomes *kekramia* (white men) on embracing *kekramia* religion but ironically their skin did not turn white like a *kekramia*”. Christianity, in Chaya’s formulation, is the white man’s religion and therefore naturally incompatible with indigenous culture and identity. However, even while Christianity is critiqued, it is still a force to reckon with and there are indications of adapting aspects of Christianity rather than a complete rejection.

For Vilezol Toso<sup>13</sup>, who has been the *Kemevo* of Viswema village for 11 years, *Krüna* for him is fulfilling a duty to his fellow adherent as he considered himself ‘the Pastor of *Krüna*’. Being a *Kemevo*, he is responsible for the fixation of the months and accordingly the ritual days are initiated. He sees his position in equivalent with the Pastor and just as the Christian require the Pastor to lead the church, Vilezol said “as a *Kemevo*, I am like the Pastor of *Krüna*”. So, with such responsibility given to him, he fears that his supposable conversion might enrage *Ukepenuopfü* and punish him for his action.

In Christian history, evangelism and education were regarded as essential part of the total Christian experience. With the doctrines written in the holy Bible, the early missionaries emphasised that Nagas should become a ‘reading people’. It is important for a Christian to know how to read and write in order to relate to it. While, for an illiterate person like Vekehele Chaya, this very reason became an impediment factor for her to derive a sense of belonging from Christianity. According to Smith (2007), Christianity works because it meets basic mental and emotional human needs and desires by providing security, love, ownership, forgiveness, bearing for moral living and belonging. However, for the *Krüna* adherents, besides emotional needs they look for a religion they can relate to and in such situation, Chaya being an illiterate person, it is not Christianity but *Krüna* which sheltered her quest to a meaningful religious life. She said:

All my siblings have converted to *kehoumia* and they keep telling me to convert but it never occurs to me to convert. Even if I convert also, I cannot read even a single word written in the Bible so, I do not feel comfortable to convert. Whether good or bad *Krüna* is all I know, so, I will follow till I can.

The religious beliefs and practices which has been passed down from generation to generation is deeply entrenched into their everyday socio-cultural life. Hence, for some adherents that is the only way of life they know as stated by Vikeril Toso, he could not think of another way of life besides *Krüna*, “our parents have done ritual and given to us, our forefathers way of life, our way of life, how can I give up our own way of life”. Likewise, Neizochonü Chaya,<sup>14</sup> 90 years old, said, she has been raised as a *Krünamia* and

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<sup>13</sup> Vilezol Toso is 68 years old. Interviewed on 11 march 2021, Viswema village.

<sup>14</sup> Neizochonü Chaya is around 90 years old. An adherent of *Krüna* and a farmer. Interviewed on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2023, Viswema village.

since she could not convert when she was a child, she does not wish to convert given that she is in her advanced age. She has eight children and everyone except one of her daughters is following *Krüna* with her and till now she initiates all the rituals for them. Her family has given feast of merit two times and till now she is diligent in observing the rituals.

For the younger *Krünamia* like Vizhodi Chaya<sup>15</sup>, who has a degree in computer science and a government employee in National Informatic Centre, said, it is not needed for him to convert because he believes that in every religion God is the same. Though, the way of worship may be different but every religion has the same aim and God. He mentioned that:

I used to attend church with my Christian friends when I was pursuing my studies but I was never convinced to get converted. Being an adherent of *Krüna*, at times people used to sarcastically tell us ‘*Krüna* do not even pray’. Though we do not pray like the Christians we also pray in our heart. So, all prayer is the same.

Meanwhile, Chaya also asserts his position of being a Naga as his real identity and not a Christian. Lozhoho Khanuo said it burdened his heart to foresee the possibility of *Krüna* disappearing and the identity of being a Naga associated with it, given that very few of them are following it. He further stated that not a day passed by without his relatives insisting him to get converted but he used to tell them, “Every religion’s God is same but if there is none to up hold *Krüna* then we all will come under someone’s religion”. It is evident that the adherents are constructing a narrative that every religion’s God is same, given that the Christian God is also referred to as *Ukepenuopfü*, at the same time drawing their boundary from the Christian that their way of worship is different. Moreover, attaching their sense of being a true Naga with *Krüna*. However, the space within which the *Krüna* adherents assert their distinct religious identity is a contested space not only because Nagaland is a predominantly Christian state but also because the assertion of a religious identity separate from Christianity is also prone to be generalised and subsumed within the Hindu fold.

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<sup>15</sup> Vizhodi Chaya is 33 years old. An adherent of *Krüna* and a government employee. Interviewed on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2023, Viswema village.

## **5.5 *Krüna* and religious reform movement**

New religious movement have emerged as a contemporary expression of indigenous religion. In the context of northeast India, religious reform movements based on the indigenous beliefs and practices have emerged among the tribals as an attempt to preserve and promote their culture and identity. This movement according to Dangmei is an attempt to reform the religious practices with the changing times while on the other hand it also drives towards the search for a pristine tribal religious and cultural identity (Dangmei, 2021). The Donyi-polo movement in Arunachal Pradesh is one such religious reform movement which was started in 1960s by the Adi intellectuals to institutionalize their indigenous religion. Talom Rukbo, a founding member of the Donyi-polo movement played an instrumental role in the institutionalization of the Adi religion and evolved the concept of ‘Donyi-Poloism’ (Chaudhuri, 2013, p. 263-264). The movement emerged due to the increase of Christian proselytization and the need felt by the Adi intellectuals to preserve the traditional faith and practices from further deterioration (ibid.). In their attempt to institutionalize the traditional faith, temples were constructed for the followers to gather and pray on Sundays, invent images/idols of gods and goddesses and placed inside the prayer hall, prepared prayer book and hymn. Chaudhuri observed that the conflation of old indigenous practices with the new reformed, institutionalised forms was able to gather followers in the name that their culture and identity are being preserved and promoted while many of the images invented are largely Hinduized idols with some local traits assimilated into such images.

Heraka movement of the Zeliangrong Nagas is another religious reform movement which has been derived from their traditional beliefs and practices called Paupaise. The movement was organised in the 1930s, and became an organised and operative movement by the 1970s in the Zeliangrong inhabited territory of Nagaland and Assam (Dangmei, 2021). The movement was launched under the leadership of Jadonang to fight against the British, to protect the religious practices and culture from the Christian proselytization and advancing of Hinduism. With the aim to reinvent the existing belief system of the Nagas a great deal of religious elements was borrowed from Christianity and Hinduism. In the attempt to standardised the belief system, Heraka reform movement emphasised on the worship of the supreme creator which was hugely influence by the monotheistic belief of Christianity; it emphasised on the abolition of certain rituals and sacrifices of animals,

which were considered expensive; the construction of prayer house; codifying of rules into a sacred text is another attempt to systematize their religious belief and practices (Longkumer, 2010). In the post-independent India, the close association of the Heraka with the Hindutva protagonists has been increasingly manifested in recent years, which in fact helped the Heraka group in sharing higher platform with the Hindus to promote their indigenous religious and cultural identity (Dangmei, 2021).

Longkumer highlighted how the Zeme Heraka used the primordial ethnic notions in determining the group membership against Christian who are viewed as ‘foreign’ and not ‘Zeme’. This depicts the fluidity of Heraka identity construction according to the context which enable them to maintain itself with the wider question of Naga identity and Nationalism. Its close association with the ‘Hindu’ organizations and the Heraka identity on the other hand was questioned by the Naga Christians. The quest to forge a distinct ethnic Naga identity based on shared history, culture, and common religion and the prevailed perception that all Nagas should be a Christian and proclamation of ‘Nagaland for Christ’ has alienated the Zeme Heraka. This has made the Zeme drift away from the Naga Christian and instead rely on the ‘Hindu’ groups for financial and organizational support. As a form of resistance, the Heraka adopt so called Hindu symbols. For the Heraka it is more a question of survival and day-to-day resistance rather than catering to the idea of nationhood. Hence, the Zeme Heraka were able to accommodate different identities without fixing themselves to anyone.

### **5.5.1 The position of *Krüna***

In his study on the Sangh Parivar activities and the ideology of Hindutva in Northeast India, Arkotong Longkumer contends that the Sangh is working closely with non-Christian indigenous religion in the region to resist the spread of Christianity and promote the territorial integrity of India (Longkumer, 2016). In the case of Northeast region, states like Nagaland, with a strong influence of Christianity and a movement for a separate nationhood presents formidable challenges to the Sangh’s vision. Concerted efforts and planned strategies are therefore envisioned to gain a foothold in these Christian dominated homelands where the appeal and hold of an Indian nation state is tenuous. The Sangh’s vision of extending the Hindu sphere of influence is also in some ways projected as the extension of the Indian nation-ness.

In this regard, Longkumer opines, “the discourse of ‘religion and culture’ is used strategically by Sangh Parivar activist in the Northeast to assimilate desperate tribal and to envision a Hindu nation” (Longkumer, 2016). Without completely dismissing Christianity, the Sangh argue that Christianity has brought about a separation between religion and culture which Longkumer said, has enable the Sangh to domesticate the ‘foreignness’ of Christianity as a tactic of national inclusion (Longkumer, 2021, p. 175).

However, how far the Sangh Parivar and other Hindu organisations are successful is not easily discernible. In fact, the question of motive is also susceptible to speculations and suspicions which tend to exaggerate the influence and activities of Hindu organisations. How and where do the adherents of *Krūna* locate themselves in these polarising narratives of Christian and Hindu claims? “*Krūna* is fast disappearing with everyone converting to Christianity therefore, it is the responsibility of people like me to carry on *Krūna*”, said Kruvil Kikhi with a voice of concern. Meanwhile, he took out a photo album and flipped through to show the pictures of the time when he attended, in his words “a conference for people from different places who follows their ancestral religion”, as one of the four representatives of Japfü Phiki Krūna Association. Dressed in his vibrant traditional attire, he stood in front of the programme banner written as ‘Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram’ (2018, Maharashtra) (image 5.1). In another group picture which also features him, it is impossible to not noticed that in the middle of the group photo also stood the statue of Sai Baba, a saint revered by the Hindu (image 5.2). On being asked about the details of the conference Kikhi replied, ‘it was a six days conference where the leaders of indigenous religion from different states came, meet and at the same time showcased their own religious rituals and practices’. He further stated “everything was conducted in Hindi which I could not understand but my other companions will recap me whatever we have being taught after the programme gets over. We were told by the resource person that, ‘we are not telling you to become a Hindu but as long as you are practicing your indigenous religion, then you are a Hindu’. We were encouraged not to give up our indigenous religion and keep following our forefather’s good way of life or else someday we will forget and not be in a position to talk about our religion, festivals and practices”. In this account of Kruvil Kikhi, should we prioritise the organisational efforts to mobilise followers of ancestral religions under the aegis and patronage of Hindu organisations or emphasise Kikhi’s agency and his effort to keep alive his ancestral religion? In any way, perspectives matter.



In a Christian dominating tribe like Angami, it is unlikely to find an educational institution run by the RSS. In Nagaland, the RSS works through an affiliate organization known as Kalyan Ashram (welfare centre), registered officially in Nagaland as Janjati Vikas Samiti (tribal development society) (Longkumer, 2016). Located at Viswema village, stands the Japfü Phiki *Krüna* school established in 1997, as a part of an educational project of Janjati Vikas Samiti Nagaland (image 5.3). Education as a part of the Sangh activities (Longkumer, 2016), the establishment of Japfü Phiki *Krüna* School with the name of Angami indigenous religion is one such example that the “long arm of Hindu right-wing organisations” had penetrated the remotest of Angami villages (Chophy, 2021, p. 129). Hung on the school office wall is the picture of Rani Gaidinliu (image 5.5), an important figure for the Sangh, given her status as a tribal, non-Christian figure to be incorporated into the Hindutva version of India (Longkumer, 2021, p. 191).



**Image 5.1:** Kruvil Kikhi attending the religious conference.

**Source:** Image reproduced with permission from the key informant (Kruvil Kikhi)



**Image 5.2:** Kruvil Kikhi attending the religious conference.

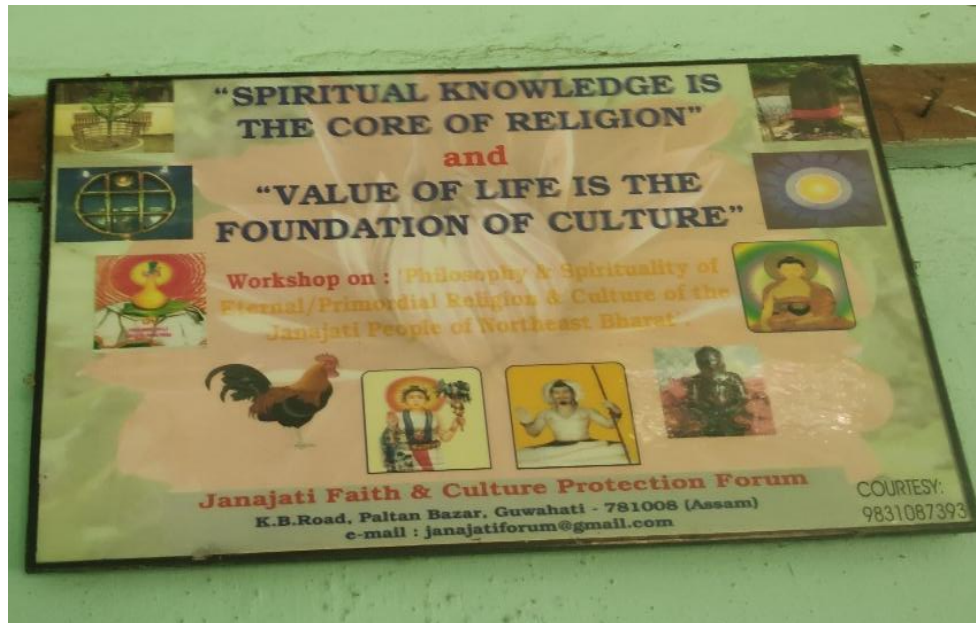
**Source:** Image reproduced with permission from the key informant (Kruvil Kikhi)



**Image 5.3:** Japfü Phiki Krüna School, Viswema

**Source:** Fieldwork





**Image 5.4:** A photo frame hung on the office wall of Japfü Phiki Krüna School, Viswema

**Source:** Fieldwork



**Image 5.5:** The office wall of Japfü Phiki Krüna School, Viswema

**Source:** Fieldwork

The church leaders and Christians in Nagaland are suspicious of the *Krüna* adherents as they associated themselves in these activities taken up by the Hindu organisations. Writing in the context of the Zeliangrong Nagas, Dangmei argues that the Zeliangrong Christians hold their religious consciousness to be more significant than their ethnicity. This privileging of the Christian religious identity over the cultural identity is fairly common among other Naga tribes and particularly pronounced in Nagaland. As we have observed in the preceding sections of this chapter, the concept of Naga identity itself is deeply immersed in Christian consciousness. *Krüna* adherents and their purported links with Hindu organisations are perceived as a double threat to the Christian identity and also to the Naga identity. For the Christians, the closeness of the Heraka with Hindu organisation betrays allegiance to Naga nationalism, Thereby, the followers of Heraka were at the receiving end of being mock by the Christians questioning their image being smeared by the Hindu influence (Dangmei, 2013).

However, the *Krünamia* does not adhere the same with the speculations hold by the Christians of them getting assimilated into the Hindu fold. They are also consciously aware of the allegations and suspicions targeted towards them. With their position as a follower of indigenous religion on continuous scrutiny, Kruvil Kikhi out-rightly stated that “no I am not a Hindu, I am a follower of *Krüna*”. Similarly, Yose Chaya who calls himself an indigenous faith believer also sternly professed his view that *Krüna* is for the Nagas and that it does not have any allegiance with the Hindus. He further clarifies that

We do not worship stones, moon or sun like the Hindus. For us, if an eclipse occurred and devoid the light, then that’s when we observe *genna* to avoid such thing to happen again in future. And that cannot be considered as we worshipping the moon.

In supporting this view, Sashevinü Toso said that ‘*Krüna* being closely connected with nature, we should not have the perception that *Krüna* is a part of Hinduism. And to consider *Krüna* as Hinduism, my father (Vikiril Toso) will not accept it’.

In the case of *Krüna*, there is no trace of any religious reform or attempt to revive their traditional religion. Though the adherents are following the religion in the best possible way as they can, the space is very limited for them to reform their practices. There is a marked difference between the adherents of *Krüna* with reform movements such as Donyi-

polo and Heraka in the sense that there is an absence of the level of mobilization in the case of *Krüina*.

*Krüina* adherent like Lozhoho Khanuo, who spent most of the years outside the village till the completion of his studies and therefore have little knowledge how most of the rituals are conducted. Moreover, now that he is working outside the village, it is not feasible for him to come to village for every ritual. In such situation, he fears a day might come for him to convert but for now he wishes to practice the religion till he can. He said “we can only practice what we can and if needed we have to leave out the rituals which are not applicable anymore. Though we do not know how to proceed yet but we, the *Krüina* adherents also discussed among ourselves the need to modernise *Krüina* with the changing of time”.

In a similar line, Vizhodi Chaya another government employee himself, also opined that he need not be an agriculturist to be a believer of *Krüina* nor he has to follow and observe every ritual. To affirm his stand, he believes that to do the ritual of *sekre* or celebrate the festival of *sekrenyi*, it is not necessary that he has to be a cultivator. He outrightly vouched that “I can carry on till I can”. Sashevinü Toso, who became a Christian four years back, do not hesitate to share her thoughts in support of her parents who are *Krüina* adherent. She said she did not shave her head the whole time she follows *Krüina* since she did her studies outside Nagaland. What she meant to say is that for *Krüina* to survive they can do away with the ritual which are not practical anymore. In Nagaland and particularly among the Angami, the space for *Krüina* to reform the religious practices is very limited given the social conditions are not conducive with the prevalence of strong Baptist faith in the state. While the antagonism between *Krüina* and Christianity were pronounced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and continues to be witnessed in subtle forms even in present day, it is curious that *Krüina* adherents did not mobilise any movement to oppose the spread of Christianity. There was no equivalent of a Heraka or Donyi-Polo movement among the Angamis. As John Thomas (2016) observed, this is largely because the early Naga intelligentsia were almost all mission school educated and converted Christians who envisioned a distinct movement for the assertion of a Naga nationhood. In other words, Christianity was internalised and appropriated as the medium through which the very identity of Naga was asserted and thus leaving little space for opposing Christianity without seeming to oppose Naga identity as well. Thus, even though *Krüina* adherents

insist on a religious identity that is distinct from Christianity, there is very limited space within which such an identity can be mobilised on a large scale.

Interestingly, the experience of the Heraka movement also serves to stifle the scope for mobilising support for *Krüna*. While Heraka began as an indigenous religious movement in the 1930s, it became increasingly assimilated into the larger discourse of Hinduism. In the context of the ‘nationalisation’ of Heraka founders Jadonang and Gaidinliu, speculations are rife that Heraka has become a launchpad for the Hindu right groups such as RSS to gain a foothold in Christian dominated states such as Nagaland. The controversy surrounding the stiff opposition against the construction of a library-cum-memorial museum in Kohima to honour Rani Gaidinliu is a case in point.<sup>16</sup> Against the backdrop of such tendencies, *Krüna* adherents also become suspects of links and connections with Hindu organisations.

## 5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the *Krüna* adherents are negotiating with various challenges in order to maintain a separate identity in the contemporary times. It is evident that the *Krüna* adherents were strongly influenced by the monotheistic idea of Christianity where the notion of Supreme Being is taking centre stage in their cosmology. Earlier, the notion of Supreme Being, *Ukepenuopfü* comes under the rubric of *terhuomia* but with a negative connotation given to the term *terhuomia* by the Christians and with the usage of *Ukepenuopfü* as equivalent to Christian God, it has also shaped the cosmological worldview of the *Krüna* adherent. The chapter has also shown how they are adjusting their ritual practices to fit into their needs especially in times of birth, marriage and festival rituals depicting the flexibility of ritual as well as the need to adapt with the changing time if *Krüna* has to survive. And as the adherents continuously negotiate to remain relevant and maintain a separate identity, they are forced to negotiate with the Naga political identity and the speculation of getting assimilated into the Hindu fold. Despite, their attempt to reassert a distinct identity in against the Christians and the Hindus, there is very limited space for *Krüna* to mobilise and forge an identity on a larger scale.

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<sup>16</sup> For more details see <https://scroll.in/article/895947/in-nagaland-a-battle-for-the-memory-of-freedom-leader-rani-gaidinliu-leads-to-competing-memorials>; <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/some-nagas-are-against-memorial-to-rani-gaidinliu-in-kohima-why/>

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